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FIREHEELS; or, Old Skinflint, the Death-Shadow.

BY ROGER STARBUCK,

AUTHOR OF "OLD TAR KNUCKLE AND HIS BOY CHUMS," "THE BOY CORAL FISHERS," ETC., ETC.



"MISERABLE RAT! HYAR I AM—SKINFLINT, YER DEATH-SHADOW!"

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OR,

Old Skinflint, the Death-Shadow.

BY ROGER STARBUCK,

AUTHOR OF "THE GOLDEN HARPOON," "THE BLACK SCHOONER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WAYLAID.

"Oh, father, what a gloomy place! I believe this is where a coach was attacked and robbed, two years ago."

"I think so, but you need not feel alarmed. If there are any robbers here, now, they would have shown themselves before this."

The first speaker was Bell Danton—a lovely girl of sixteen, with black eyes, a rosy, piquant face and a round, supple form.

Her father, who had replied to her, as shown, was an energetic-looking man, now on his way to establish a salmon factory, near the Salmon River mountains, Idaho Territory.

The traveling-coach in which the girl and her parent were seated had just entered a gloomy gorge, the rocky walls of which were thickly covered with shrubbery, while below, on each side of the road, extended a dense thicket of willows, adding to the gloom of the locality.

The coach, containing gold-dust, taken in at Montana, was on its way to Salt Lake City. There were, besides the two passengers mentioned, ten more, five of them, who wore slouched hats and heavy boots, having the appearance of miners. Three of the others were elderly women and the remaining two were heavy, sleepy-looking Germans. All the male occupants of the vehicle were armed—the miners, especially, being well provided with revolvers and knives.

Presently both Bell and her father leaned forward, peeping through a window, on seeing a young hunter half-hidden by the willows, seated on a rocky ledge, apparently gazing at the coach. The brief, indistinct glimpse the two obtained of him showed him to be a mere youth of nineteen, of handsome, manly appearance.

He wore a hunting-shirt of dressed deerskin, a catskin cap, leggings and moccasins. In his right hand he held a rifle, and in a broad belt about his waist were a pistol and a knife.

"A trim-looking fellow, I should say," remarked Mr. Danton, "although I caught but a 'flying' glimpse of him."

"He looked well enough," replied Bell, a blush suffusing her smooth cheeks. "I only glanced at him."

Her father laughed.

"The glance was a long one, at all events," he remarked.

The vehicle had nearly passed through the gorge, when suddenly a couple of men sprang from the shrubbery and seized the horses' reins.

At the same moment a noise was heard on the roof of the coach and the driver tumbled senseless to the ground.

"There are only two robbers!" cried Mr. Danton, drawing a revolver from his pocket and addressing the miners. "Come, we can easily drive them off!"

As he spoke, he opened the window, but ere he could raise his weapon, two of the supposed miners held their pistols at his head, while another struck his wrist with a force which caused his revolver to drop from his grasp. The other two miners, with the muzzles of their pistols jammed against the heads of the Germans, threatened to blow out their brains if they attempted resistance.

Bell, with a shriek of terror, clung to her parent, when she was roughly ordered to let go of him.

The coach-door was opened and three villainous-looking fellows, attired like the pretended miners, who it was now evident were their confederates, rushed in.

"Come, gal," said one, "stop yer squawking, or we'll stick yer with this!"

And, as he spoke, he pulled a formidable knife from his belt.

"You had better keep silent, Bell," said Mr. Danton. "Your cries can do no good. There is, evidently, no person in this wilderness at hand to help us."

"Yer may think yerselves lucky to git off with yer lives!" exclaimed one of the gang. "All we want is the dust, and what little valuables, in the shape of gold watches, jewelry,

etc., you and the other passengers may hev about 'em."

"So, then, you took passage in this coach to rob it?" said Mr. Danton, in order to gain time, for he fancied he heard approaching footsteps.

"Yer might see that with one eye. Come, fork over—you and yer gal heer, or it'll be the worse fur yer!"

"I have not much money with me, and my daughter has no jewelry."

"As ef we hadn't our eye on the gold watch she tuck out a moment sence."

"That watch was a present from her mother, before she died. Surely you might let her keep it."

At that instant the sharp ring of a rifle was heard, followed by a groan near the coach, as one of the robbers holding the horses dropped dead, shot through the brain.

"This way, pards, this way!" came a clear, trumpet-like voice, and, from the dense willows, rushed half a dozen sturdy fellows, in buckskin, headed by the same youth who had been watching the coach go past the ledge on which he sat.

Both Mr. Danton and Bell could see him through the window, as he dashed toward the vehicle.

Cries of rage escaped the robbers. They jumped from the coach, and, in a moment, all disappeared in the thick shrubbery, on the side of the gorge opposite to that from which the hunter and his companions had advanced.

The youth already alluded to had entered the coach.

He was, as stated, a fine handsome fellow. His face, bronzed by sun and wind, glowed with health, he had clear, blue eyes, long, brown hair, and a firm, handsome mouth, graced by a slight mustache.

Raising his catskin cap, he said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am glad to say that my pards and I hev driven off the robbers. It was fortunate that we were near enough to hear the crack of the varmint's pistol. We suspected how things were, and came like white-lightning, at your sarvice!"

Mr. Danton smiled and shook hands with the speaker.

"After I get settled near Logville, where I am building a salmon-factory, I shall be happy to have you call on me."

"Thanks, I shall be happy to come," said the youth. "But the place is a long way from hyar. You'll hev to foot it for at least twenty miles, and ef you like, I'd be pleased to be your escort."

"Oh, yes, sir, that is if it would not be too much trouble," said Bell, blushing.

"None at all, miss," answered the youth, his blue eyes sparkling with pleasure.

"I should be glad of your company," said Mr. Danton.

Meanwhile the coachman had persuaded the other hunters to go with him a short distance, as he was afraid of a renewal of the attack by the robbers, further on.

The six men were therefore in the coach when the driver, who had recovered his senses, again started his horses.

A ride of about thirty miles brought Bell and her father to the station where they would be obliged to leave the vehicle. They were fortunate enough to hire a wagon and team, when, in company with Frank Belton, they kept on for the new settlement—then called Logville.

There they finally arrived, when Belton, politely declining an invitation from Mr. Danton to go to his house with him, but promising to call upon him in a few days, took leave of father and daughter.

"Do you know that young fellow?" Danton inquired of some rugged-looking hunter-settlers, who were busy about their houses.

"Oh, yes, sir, that's FIREHEELS."

"Why is he called Fireheels?"

"Because once, when he was captured by Snake Indians, he escaped by running through a burning thicket, which they had set on fire. Since that the Indians have all given him that yere name."

"But how could he go into the fire without being burned to death?"

"Well, yer see the thicket had jest begun to burn, hyar and thar, but 'fore he got through he was almost in a cage of fire. Then he took off his buckskin shirt, and wrapped it round his head fur the rest o' the way."

"So then, besides having other good qualities our friend is a salamander," Mr. Danton laughingly remarked to his daughter, as the two moved on.

Bell smiled, but made no reply.

A few minutes later she and her parent entered the new house which had been erected and prepared for their reception by one of Mr. Danton's agents.

CHAPTER II.

THE QUARREL.

MR. DANTON had not been long in Logville, when he became tolerably well acquainted with his neighbors. Among those who called upon him, was a young man of twenty, named Luke Lorne. He appeared to be an intelligent person, although his manners were coarse, and he had a habit of using violent expletives, when provoked.

He was rough in appearance, with large features, thick lips, and a constant twinkle in his blue eyes. His hair, of an auburn tint, curled closely about his round 'bullet-head,' and a heavy mustache of the same hue flourished on his upper lip. In stature he was about the middling height, broad in the shoulders and otherwise powerfully built.

It was of this person, who owned several houses and many plots of ground in Logville, that Mr. Danton had purchased the site for his salmon factory, now being erected. Lorne was said to have inherited much money from a relative, who had died at a distant settlement and made him his heir.

"A worthy young man, I should say," remarked Bell's father to the girl, one day after Lorne had paid them a visit. "He wants a wife—he hinted as much to me. He even went further, saying that what first attracted him to you was a startling resemblance, which you bear to a fair cousin of his named Ellen Boardman, of whom he was very fond. He told me that when he first beheld you, in the street, he thought you were his cousin, Ellen, and was going to address you as such, when he saw me come from my factory, to meet you, and heard me call you by your first name, which showed him his mistake."

"If so fond of this cousin why did not he marry her?"

"Oh, well, he did not like her in that way, you know—only as a brother."

"I must confess I have a curiosity to see this girl who so much resembles me."

"It seems she does not live here now. She has moved to another settlement. Her mother, who was a widow and an invalid, fancied that the climate a little further North would do her good. Lately, however, Lorne heard that the widow was supposed to be dying, and he seemed much affected by the news, for he has a heart—this Lorne—besides being a person of means. Upon my word, I don't think you could 'do better.'"

"I suppose you are jesting, father," said Bell, "but if you are not, I should let you know that Mr. Lorne is a man whom I never could wish for a husband. He is too coarse—too—"

"Pooh!" said her parent, "you mistake his gruff backwoods air for coarseness. For my part I admire the manly bearing of our Western pioneers."

"So do I," said Bell. "I do not dislike the rough frankness of the trapper; but Mr. Lorne is different from the wild prairie-men. There is something vile—something mean and cunning in his way, which reminds me of the wolf and fox combined."

"Upon my word you give him a good name," remarked Mr. Danton, rising and leaving the room.

For half an hour after he was gone Bell sat silent and thoughtful.

"Where have I seen his face before?" she asked herself, as she had done several times since becoming acquainted with Mr. Lorne. "I have certainly seen it somewhere before we came here."

All at once the truth flashed upon her mind.

"Yes, the more I think of it, the more I am convinced that it was *there* I saw that face," she continued—"in the coach which was attacked. It was the face of one of the three robbers who rushed into the vehicle. Owing to the slouched hat and a high coat-collar, I could not see the eyes; but the nose, the mustache, and the sneering smile were this Lorne's."

Then it occurred to Bell that possibly she might be mistaken. It was likely there were other faces in the world like Lorne's; and so, even if she clung to her suspicion, she would say nothing about it to her father or to any other person.

As time went on it seemed evident that Lorne, undiscouraged by Bell's coldness, was making, as he had owned to her father, 'a dead set' against her affections.

Mr. Danton reasoned with his daughter, cit-

ing Lorne's wealth, his 'blunt honesty,' as he termed it, his manly strength of character, etc., as recommendations; but in vain.

Occasionally there was another caller—young Belton, or "Fireheels," as he was termed by most settlers and Indians.

He always received a kind welcome from Bell, although her father had lately treated the youth with marked coldness.

As Belton was approaching one day for the purpose of paying him another visit, he met Mr. Danton, who, contrary to his habit, scarcely replied to his greeting.

"Are you going to my house?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir; I was going thar," answered the young hunter.

"I have to tell you, then, that I would prefer that you discontinue your visits."

Belton stared at the speaker in surprise.

"It may seem rude for me to say this," continued Danton, "but I have a good reason."

"Ef you'll speak more plainly, I'll thank you," said Fireheels.

"Well, then, I understand that you have boasted to some of your companions that you were going to marry an heiress—that she was 'dead in love' with you, and that you expected to make more money that way than you could by twenty years' trapping and hunting. Of course, the heiress you alluded to was my daughter!"

Belton's eyes flashed fire.

"Whar did you hear such a base lie, sir? Some one, I see, has been plotting against me."

"I heard it from a person in whom I have confidence enough to know that he would not lie."

"Who is the coon, and whar kin I find him?" said Fireheels.

"It matters not. I wish to breed no quarrels."

With these words, Mr. Danton turned on his heel, moving toward his factory.

Belton stood for some moments looking after him like one dazed. Then he also turned and walked away.

"Ef I could only find the varmint who has spoiled the sweetest part of my life, which has been since I've got to going to Mr. Danton's, and seeing the most beautiful gal that ever lived—ef I could find the rascal, I'd drag him before the man that's just spoken to me, and make him own that it was a falsehood he had told."

Thus muttered Belton to himself as he hurried on and entered a lonely valley a few miles from the settlement.

As he was about to cross the valley to climb up the other side of it, he heard a girl's voice, rising from behind a rock, a few yards in advance of him.

"Go away! Lona does not want the white man's money. She has a heart which is better than money, even if her skin is red."

"But," came the voice of a man, "Fireheels has shot and wounded one of your tribe. They should be glad to have their revenge."

"Revenge is sweet to the red-man," was the answer, "but Fireheels never shot one of our tribe. It was the Indian of another tribe, who wanted to join us, that he shot—and then only because the Indian was going to shoot him."

"But all the red-men should be of one mind. So long as it was an Indian he wounded, what difference does it make to which tribe he belonged?"

"Lona has heard enough; she will go. The white man's money shall never tempt her to plot with her tribe against Fireheels."

Belton now saw the girl move rapidly away up the valley and disappear in the shrubbery beyond. At the same moment, from behind the rock emerged Luke Lorne, looking angry and disappointed.

The young hunter stole up toward him, so lightly that he did not see him until he raised his eyes.

He started and turned pale, but, in a moment, he recovered his composure.

"Well?" he said, a little haughtily, as Belton stood gazing straight into his face. "What do you want?"

"I overheard, by chance, what was said. You've been plotting against me, Luke Lorne."

"Well, suppose I have. You are a nuisance to the country, going about shooting Indians, and, in that way, exciting the ill-will of the savages against the white settlers!"

"I never yet shot a savage whose hand was not first raised against me. You know that, well enough."

"I cannot stop to bandy words with you," responded the other, "my time is too precious."

"I hev a question to put to you before you go," said the hunter, as he brought the butt of

his rifle to the ground. "I hev to ask you ef it was you who told that lie against me to Mr. Danton."

"What do you mean?"

Belton explained in a few words.

"It was no lie," was the answer. "I can read you like a book, and I know you have said something of that sort."

"I never said it. It is not in me to talk that way. You own then you are the varmint who told the falsehood."

"I told him, but I don't think it was a falsehood. Keep your distance," added Lorne, pulling a revolver from his pocket, as Belton stepped toward him.

With one dextrous blow of his rifle, the hunter knocked the pistol from the speaker's grasp, and laid an iron hand on his collar.

"You will go to Mr. Danton, and own to him that what you said was an infarnal lie, or I'll thrash you."

"Never!" answered Lorne, gruffly, as he struck the other in the face.

The two closed in a struggle.

Both were equally strong, but Fireheels was the more active of the two.

All at once he dexterously twisted his adversary across his hip and flung him headlong to the ground.

Lorne had already been severely pummeled by the other youth, and now, his skull striking a stone, he lay for a moment stunned.

At length he arose, but showed no disposition to renew the combat.

"I will yet be even with you for this," he said, as he picked up his revolver and moved off.

Belton watched him scornfully as he left the valley, and then turning, walked away.

CHAPTER III.

A DARK DEED.

ON the afternoon of the day following the quarrel between Belton and Lorne, Miss Danton went out for a walk. The bright, clear weather and the charming scenery tempted her to go further than usual.

Finally she found herself in the valley where the hunter and Lorne had had their dispute. She sat down on a mossy rock to rest, when her attention was attracted by a sound behind her, which she at once knew to be that of a rattlesnake.

She arose, but the snake was coiled ready to dart upon her, and she feared to move. There she stood, her eyes meeting the bright little orbs of the creature, as, with head erect, it gazed steadily upon her.

The next moment it would have sprung upon her, but for a rifle which rung not far off, sending a bullet through its head and killing it almost instantly.

The clear voice of Fireheels was now heard from the upper edge of the valley.

"A plum-center shot, and it certainly was never more necessary than now!"

He advanced and looked at the snake, while Bell thanked him for the timely rescue.

"I happened to be passing and saw your situation, miss," said Belton, "and I'm glad chance brought me this way."

"You have not called on us lately," said Bell.

"Well, no; I hev been pretty busy hunting lately," said the youth, coloring, as he remembered her father's words to him on the previous day.

"I'll not say anything to her about it," he thought.

Soon after sundown, Bell, bidding him good-day and bestowing upon him a smiling glance from her large black eyes, moved off homeward.

He stood watching her until she entered a piece of woods a hundred yards ahead, when all at once he hurried after her.

Mr. Danton, learning from Bell's aunt that the young girl was gone out for a walk, concluded to go to meet her on her return.

He walked some distance when, just at dusk, gazing ahead of him, he saw Fireheels apparently looking at something in a hollow. He hurried to the side of the youth, and a cry of horror escaped him at the spectacle which met his gaze.

In the hollow, lying upon her back, was the dead body of a female, who had evidently been throttled, as there were finger-marks upon the throat.

"Good God! it is my daughter!" cried Mr. Danton.

For a moment he stood like one transfixed, gazing with grief and horror upon the dead form.

"What does this mean?" he then said fiercely,

shaking Belton by the shoulder. "Answer me, will you?"

"God knows I would if I could," the youth replied. "It seems to me like a dream. Only half an hour ago she was alive and well."

"Who killed her?" continued Mr. Danton, confronting the other and looking him straight in the face. "Come, perhaps you will not be so ready to answer me now."

Belton's cheeks, which had already lost some of their ruddy color, became yet paler.

"I do not know."

"In my opinion, you know more about this affair than you pretend!" said Danton, hoarsely.

A look of horror was blended with the expression of grief on the face of the youth.

"I think I understand you, sir," he cried; "but as true as thar is a God above us, you wrong me. So far from hurting that sweet gal, I'd have risked my own life in her defense!"

"How happens it that I find you, and you alone, by her body?"

Belton commenced by explaining about the serpent.

"I saw her reach the woods; then I noticed a form skulking about in the shadow, as ef watching her. As well as I could make out, when I got nearer, it seemed to be a woman. Thinking that one of her own sex could mean her no harm, I turned and kept upon my way, which was in a direction from the woods. I had not gone far, and had got behind a knoll, which hid them from my sight, when I thought I heard a scream from that way. I hurried to the woods as fast as I could go, and when I got thar I came upon this," added Belton, shuddering as he pointed to the body.

"Your story seems improbable," said Mr. Danton. "My daughter could not have been killed in this way by a woman."

"No—no woman would hev been likely to do it," answered Belton.

Mr. Danton looked darkly at the speaker; then he seized him by the collar, and, at the same time drew a pistol from his pocket.

"Come, sir, you are not going to escape me. You shall go with me before Mr. Bole, the justice."

"Hands off, sir, hands off," said Belton, more in sorrow than in anger. "And there is no need of your drawing your pistol. The sight of that sweet one, in that condition," he added, in a voice of anguish, "has taken the spunk clean out of me. But I am willing to go, of my own accord, with you to the justice, and tell him all I know, which is what I hev just told you."

"Come, then, come at once!"

Belton, like one walking in a dream, followed Mr. Danton to the settlement.

They went before the justice of the place—a hard-featured man named John Bole, who had been elected to his present position through Lorne's influence.

To him Belton and Mr. Danton told their story.

The merchant then drew Mr. Bole to one side, and whispered to him, when the latter withdrew for a few minutes, to soon return with several stout, armed men.

"You will be put under arrest, Frank Belton, while the inquest is going on," said the justice. "I hope that some new light may then be thrown upon the affair, which will clear you from suspicion."

"And is it possible," said Fireheels, seeming to commune with himself rather than to address the men before him, "that thar kin be any suspicion of my having killed that sweet, baby-faced gal?"

He was led off to a stone building, which, serving the purpose of a temporary jail, stood out at the further extremity of the settlement. The room in which he was confined was in the upper part of the edifice, and had but two small windows, across which were fixed strong, iron bars.

An hour later an inquest was held over the remains of the murdered girl, but no new facts were brought to light.

Lorne, who acted as foreman of the jury, wound up with the following remarks:

"I will not say that Mr. Belton perpetrated this foul crime, but I will say, and in this all the gentlemen of the jury agree with me, that he alone being found near the body, coupled with his own statement that he was with the young lady just before the tragedy, give strong grounds for suspecting that he and none other was the assassin!"

"And yit he has the name of bein' sech an honest chap," said one of the members.

"Honest enough he doubtless is," said Lorne.

"but he has a terrible temper. You can see it in his eyes."

"That's so," "Jest so," "I reckon that's Gospel truth," and other ejaculations of a similar nature, escaped the lips of the other members of the jury.

CHAPTER IV.

THE INDIAN GIRL.

SEVERAL days passed, during which preparations were being made for Belton's trial. It had been predicted by persons who had visited him that circumstances were so strong against him that he would surely be hung for the crime of which he was supposed to be guilty.

On the fourth night after the murder, as he sat in the prison, with his head bowed upon his hands, he imagined he heard a sort of scratching noise, above his head.

He looked up. The noise was repeated, and then, slowly and gradually, the scuttle of the apartment was raised, and a human head was thrust through the opening.

By the dim light of the candle in his room, Belton recognized the face, which was that of Lona, the Indian girl, who belonged to a tribe of Omahas, encamped some miles from the settlement.

She made a motion with her hand for him to keep silent; then she lowered into the room a slender rope-ladder, the upper end of which she had fastened to a hook, by means of which the scuttle had been secured on the outside.

She next motioned to the youth to mount.

He shook his head, and made signs to her to go away, but she would not do so.

Instead of that, she descended into the room, revealing a face and form, which were more than usually attractive.

Her long, black hair, escaping from under a jaunty little cap, ornamented with a drooping red feather, hung below the hollow of her back. Her skin, although of dusky hue, glowed with health, her features were regular and noble, and a sweeter mouth could hardly be imagined. Her eyes, large, black and soft, beamed with a blended expression of gentleness and spirit, her hands were as small as a child's, and her shapely feet were incased in mouse-colored moccasins. The robe of light deer-skin confined about the waist and ornamented with fringe, showed the grace and beauty of her shape to advantage, and nothing could have been more easy and natural than her movements.

"Listen," she whispered. "The Fireheels knows that Lona is his friend. He must go away from here, or his death will be sure. Once Lona saved his life, and he then promised her that he would never refuse any request she might make. Come, let her save his life a second time."

"It may not be," answered the hunter. "Go back, Lona, or you will get yourself into trouble. I know I made promise to grant any reasonable request of yours, but this one is unreasonable."

"Lona will not go till Fireheels goes with her," said the girl, resolutely. "If he would get her into trouble, let him refuse."

"You know not, gal, what you're talking about. In the first place, there's no prospects of death, for, if I stay hyar, my innocence on trial must be proved."

"Tell me where you would look for justice," said Lona, with dilating eyes. "The Indian girl has keen eyes. There is one person who will do all he can to hurry the young hunter to his fate. I need not tell Fireheels who that is."

"I kin think of no one who could be mean enough for such a thing."

"It is the man Luke Lorne that Lona speaks of. He hates the hunter. Lona has watched him, and she knows it. What she says is true. If Fireheels does not leave this place that man will cause him to be hung! Lona has heard him say he would do that."

"You've heard the rascal say that?"

"It is true. Fireheels knows that Lona would not lie. The missionaries who have visited her tribe, besides teaching her to read and write, have taught her to tell the truth. Come, will the hunter go with Lona now?"

"Yes, gal, I will. If there's to be any trickery on the trial by that mean coon, sooner than give him the satisfaction of hanging an innocent man, I will go with you."

The dark eyes of the girl sparkled with joy. She pointed to the rope-ladder, which the prisoner now nimbly ascended.

After he had mounted it, Lona followed. She drew up the ladder and gently closed the scuttle. Then, coiling the ropes about her neck, she

pointed to a tree which stood about a foot from the edge of the roof.

The building was not guarded by sentinels. Persons were only temporarily confined there to await their trials, after which they were removed to a better and stronger jail in a settlement a few miles beyond Logville.

Belton, descending the tree, was soon joined by his rescuer.

The night was not very dark, and the girl went ahead to keep a lookout. In a few minutes she returned hastily.

"Down! down in the bushes!" she whispered. "Lorne coming this way with party of men. He already has seen Lona!"

Belton crouched behind a clump of shrubbery, and a moment later Lorne came up.

"Halloa! Lona here at this time of the night," he cried, suspiciously, "and so near the jail, too!"

"Lona goes everywhere," she answered, coolly.

"That's so," spoke up one of the men, laughing; "that gal is like a ghost. Yer meet her everywhere, and at all times of the night."

"But I thought I saw some one with her just now," continued Lorne. "Come, Lona, speak up and tell us who was with you," he added, moving toward the clump of shrubbery behind which Belton was crouched.

Fireheels perceived that discovery was inevitable if he remained where he was.

There was a hollow behind him, and into this he slid.

"I'm going to look behind these bushes," said Lorne, turning to the two men with him. "Remember, with a murderer in yonder jail, it is necessary to be careful. Here we are on our way, now, to suggest to the justice that irons be put upon his wrists, and it would be strange enough if, while we are taking these precautions, he should succeed in escaping."

So saying, he moved the shrubbery aside, and peered behind it.

Belton had trusted to his being concealed by the darkness in the hollow; but Lorne, stepping forward, stooped and looked down into it.

Fireheels remained so still in the pit that Lorne did not at first perceive that any one was there.

To the intense surprise of Belton, he now heard a low, hissing voice at his ear.

"Jest change places with me, and yer'll see him go off like a ghost. Quick! Heer he comes!"

The speaker—a long, gaunt shadow—had emerged from a mass of high grass in the hollow on Belton's right.

The youth could not, of course, see him distinctly—could discern little of him except his eyes, and these seemed fairly ablaze, like those of some wild beast. They looked like round balls of fire, girdled by two white rings; and as he met the steadfast gaze, he felt a hand, like the claws of a bear, clutch him by the arm.

Mechanically, he shifted his position to the left of the stranger, who at once took his place.

Lorne, thinking he saw a moving form, had been about to creep down the side of the hollow.

Then, all at once the strange being elevating his head in the moonlight, as if it was that of a serpent, whispered in the young man's ear four words, which caused him to start back with a low cry of terror, and draw quickly away from the hollow.

"What is it? What did yer see?" inquired Lorne's companions.

"Nothing," he said.

"Then there was no one there?"

"No; but a snake rubbed against my hand, and it startled me!"

CHAPTER V.

THE COMBAT.

LORNE and the men with him moved on.

As soon as they were out of sight, Belton turned to thank the person who had so opportunely saved him from being discovered.

To his surprise, he then perceived that the stranger was gone.

"Did you see that man come out of the pit?" he inquired of Lona.

"Yes, he go off that way like a shadow," and she pointed toward the eastward.

"It was very strange," said Belton. "He merely whispered something in Lorne's ear, which sent him away at once."

"Lona is glad. She much afraid the white hunter be taken again."

"Seeing the other person in the pit, I reckon Lorne hadn't any suspicion I was thar."

"No, but he soon find out now; you escape, and we must go fast. Come, we have far to go."

It was late ere the twain reached the camp of the Omahas. The chief—a tall, dignified savage—came forward and welcomed Belton.

"Fireheels is safe with the Omahas," he said. "There was a time when he saved the tribe, and now the tribe will save him. Wono does not forget!"

"That I saved your tribe, Wono, is very true; but you had to streak it some to save yourselves after I warned you that the Blackfeet were coming to attack you."

"The hunter has had poor food of late," remarked Lona. "Let my brother give him of the best in the camp."

"Ugh! That is good. He shall have it," answered the chief.

Belton was conducted to a tent, and he was soon partaking of a good repast.

When he had finished it, Lona came in, and spread for him in one corner a comfortable couch of skins.

The hunter, soon after, was buried in a profound slumber, from which he was awakened, before midnight, by a hand upon his shoulder.

He opened his eyes, to behold, by the light of the moon, which was now shining, the face and form of a youth of seventeen, who stood looking down upon him with a troubled aspect.

Belton recognized him as Tamina the son of one of the old Indian chiefs.

"Well, why hev you waked me from a sound and sweeter sleep than I've had before, since I was arrested?"

"There is a reason. Tamina would ask the white hunter to leave the camp."

"To leave your camp? Who sent you on that errand? Was it Lona?"

"It was not Lona. Lona is glad to have the hunter here, and that is why Tamina is not glad."

"I understand—a case of jealousy; but you needn't trouble yourself, Tamina; I'm not going to try to cut you out."

"That is why Tamina thinks the hunter should go away. If he wanted Lona for his squaw, then the Indian would not say a word. But he knows the heart of the Fireheels is away from the 'Singing-Thrush,' and he would not have her throw hers away on him!"

"Nonsense! The gal doesn't care for me in the way you think. She is friendly, for the little service I did her tribe. That is all."

"It is not so. She will never be the squaw of Tamina while Fireheels is here."

Again the hunter told the young Indian, what he really believed to be the case—that he was mistaken. The other insisted he was not.

"And so Fireheels must go."

"Thar'll be a price on my head. I'll be hunted down for a crime I couldn't hev done, had I tried. If I go, I'll be arrested."

"Is it better, then, that Fireheels should break the heart of Singing-Thrush?"

"Thar's no danger of that. I'll not leave your camp, so long as Wono is willing I should stay hyar."

"The hunter will not go?"

"I have said it."

"Then Tamina and he are no longer friends."

"Come, Injun, you'll not be so foolish as that," said Belton.

"What Tamina says he means."

"You are not going to betray me?" said Belton, sternly.

But the young Indian abruptly left the tent, making no reply. Belton turned over on his couch and again dropped to sleep. On the following afternoon Tamina made his appearance before Fireheels, who was still in the tent which had been given up to him for his use.

"The white hunter has refused to leave the Omaha camp!"

"I hev. Why should I leave it?"

"I have said why. Will Fireheels refuse to meet Tamina, too?"

"To meet you?"

"Yes. Tamina would meet Fireheels, knife in hand, that he and the Indian may fight out their quarrel!"

"I have no quarrel with you, Injun. I don't want to take human life of I kin help it."

"The words of Fireheels are big. His heart may be big, too. But I will try it."

"Come, now, Tamina, thar's no use of your trying to force a fight on me. I'm friendly to your people, and don't want to hurt you."

The young Indian curled his lip.

"Tamina knows how to use his knife as well as the hunter."

"Perhaps you do, but I repeat I'm not going to fight you."

"Then Fireheels is afraid: He has the heart of a squaw—of a coward!"

The quick temper of the youth was not proof against this taunt.

Ere he himself was hardly aware of it his hand flew out against the speaker's tawny cheek. The other showed no emotion whatever, except a fierce glitter of the eyes.

"Fireheels has struck Tamina. He cannot refuse him, now, what he asked!"

"I suppose you're right," said Belton, regretfully. "Whar shall we meet?"

"A mile from here there is a willow grove."

"I know the place."

"Near the grove there are thick bushes. I will be there, waiting for Fireheels!"

"All right, Injun," said the hunter. "I'll be thar with you, before the sun goes down."

Tamina strode out of the tent, and at once repaired to the spot he had mentioned.

A man emerged from the clump of shrubbery. It was Luke Lorne.

"Well, how did you make out?" he inquired.

"Fireheels will soon be here. Has my white brother posted his men?"

"Yes, there are eight of them, four being officers of the law."

"It is well," said Tamina.

While he was speaking, Fireheels left the camp, and was soon on his way to the appointed rendezvous.

The impatient young Indian went forward a short distance, and climbed up a tree to watch for his coming.

At that moment Lorne heard a low whistle, close behind him. He turned to behold a tall lean, figure he had never seen before, wearing a slouched hat and a teamster's long blue frock.

"This way," said the stranger, drawing the youth to one side. "You are after Fireheels, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you wait for him he'll escape yer. He has suspicions, and will come round this way, instead of taking the path you expected he would!"

"Who are you, and how do you know?"

"To your first question I hev to say that I'm a person, who, heerin' of the escape of that murderer, hev made up my mind to do what I could to help catch him. I hev been watching him, since he left the Omaha camp, and I know what I'm talking about. I saw him take the route which will lead to your rear. He will then see you and your men posted here, and will hev no trouble to avoid you."

"What is your name?"

"John Henderson, sir."

"Well, Henderson, if what you say is true, and we succeed in re-arresting that fellow, who I may say is guilty of one of the foulest crimes ever committed, I shall reward you."

"Thank you, sir. Follow me, and I will put yer in the way of capturin' him."

CHAPTER VI.

BAFFLED.

HEADED by Henderson, Lorne and his men moved swiftly and stealthily through the grove.

"It seems to me you are taking us a long distance," remarked Lorne, as the man kept on, after passing through the grove.

"It's the only way to catch him. He, too, is going to take a long, roundabout course."

They kept on in silence. The shadows deepened as they proceeded.

"There," said Henderson, pausing at last near a small valley. "Here, behind these bushes, we will wait for about five minutes, when we will see Fireheels pass."

The five minutes went by and thirty more, but no sign of Fireheels was to be seen.

Henderson, who had crept away from the party, saying he would go and look if he could see any sign of the young hunter, had not yet returned.

Meanwhile Fireheels, having left the Omaha camp, hurried along toward the place where he had agreed to meet Tamina, who now, from his position in the tree, saw him approaching.

"Ugh!" muttered the Indian. "Tamina will have the white hunter in a trap, and this shall be his revenge. He has won the heart of Lona away from the Indian!"

He then descended from the tree, and took his position near the shrubbery, in which he supposed Lorne was still hidden with his men.

"Tamina has waited long," he said to the youth, as he came up. "He began to think Fireheels was not coming."

"I always keep my word," the hunter quietly answered, "but I'll own I'm sorry thar must be

this knife-work between me and one of the tribe which are my friends!"

"Fireheels can never be the friend of Tamina," the Indian replied. "Come, let him draw, for the sun is down, and it is time we commenced the fight."

The youth pronounced the last word in a loud voice, as it was the signal agreed upon for Lorne to rush forth, and seize his prisoner.

Not a sound, however, was to be heard in the bushes.

Belton drew his knife, and said he was ready.

Tamina pretended to be looking at his blade, as if to make sure it was in good condition, when, in reality he was delaying the fight, in order to give Lorne time to come out of the shrubbery.

Seeing no sign of him, he was enraged, and he now made a sudden rush at his opponent, aiming his knife at his heart. Belton avoided the thrust by twisting himself, and, at the same time, pricked the Indian in the right arm.

Tamina, with flashing eyes, drew back, and, perceiving he was no match for the skilled hunter in the use of the knife, he quickly loosened his tomahawk from his belt, and sent it flying, with tremendous force, full at the head of his opponent.

The latter dodged quickly enough to avoid the flying missile; then he ran at the Indian, aiming at his arm another blow, which, had it taken effect, would have disabled the limb for some time.

But the wily savage avoided the thrust by gliding behind a tree, and then, suddenly pointing full at the youth a pistol, which he pulled from his pocket, he fired.

The bullet would have passed through the hunter's heart, had not a strong arm knocked aside the pistol, ere it was discharged, causing the shot to take an upward direction!

At the same moment, the young Indian fell senseless to the earth, as he received a blow from the butt of a revolver upon his head.

"Thar, yer are—but the mean skunk hev not got his deserts, which would be a knife in his gizzard!" was uttered by the person, who to Lorne had said his name was Henderson.

Belton saw before him, wearing a teamster's frock, a tall, sinewy personage, so thin that he had the appearance of a gaunt shadow. Although, in reality, not more than forty-two years of age, he looked as if many years older.

His visage was half-concealed by a white beard, which descended to his chest, his nose was long and straight, his eyes, of a light gray color, looked almost white.

"A timely interference," said the young hunter. "That varmint asked to meet me here that we might fight out a little trouble of his own making, with knives. He broke his agreement by first using his tomahawk and then his pistol. To whom do I owe my rescue?"

"My real name is SKINFLINT. This red-skin hyar did not mean to fight you at all, but to lead you in an ambush of Lorne and his men. They were to come out on you, 'fore the fight could begin, but I balked the raskil nicely. Lorne and his party are at least half a mile from hyar!"

He went on to explain.

"How did you discover Tamina's intentions?" inquired Belton.

"I overheard what he said, last night, to Lorne, when he met him. I was close by in the shrubbery."

"You seem to take a kindly interest in my affairs, thar's a fact," said Belton, holding out his hand.

A strange, fierce light gleamed in Skinflint's eyes.

"I b'lieve in helpin' them that's in trouble," was the answer, "and," he added, in a voice hoarse with passion, "I've made one vow of revenge, which I'd go through coals of fire to keep. But, come, you are no longer safe in the Omaha camp."

Belton followed the speaker, who made his way toward the mountains, looming up in the distance.

"I know a cave yonder, whar all the detectives in the universe couldn't find yer."

"Thar is many a cave thar, which I know of myself," said Fireheels, "but they are also known to other hunters."

"The place I'll take yer to was never known to mortal man but me."

By the time the two reached the mountains the moon had risen and lighted the dark rocks wherever they were exposed to her rays.

Skinflint, raising a small boulder on the summit of a cliff, revealed a hollow in which a rope was coiled. One end of this rope he fastened to a projecting rock; then he dropped the other,

allowing it to dangle from the edge of the height.

"Yer kin see a ledge ten feet below us," he said. "Climb down to that ledge and push aside the bushes thar, and yer'll see an openin' which will take yer into a cave."

"Are you coming?"

"Not now. In the cave yer'll find deer's meat and other things which are useful."

"Suppose I should want to come out before you join me?"

"Yer'll find a sort o' rope-ladder thar by which yer kin reach the rock twelve feet below the ledge. Come, yer better lose no time in git-tin' to yer quarters, for Lorne and his men are by this arter yer like so many bloodhounds."

"Upon my word, I think you are very good to me!" said Belton.

"I hev reason to be."

"What?"

"I hev reason, fur I never furgit a kindness. Do yer remember a stormy night, one year ago, when yer saved a gal, which was lost, from being captured by savages or froze to death, and went miles out o' yer way to take her to her home?"

"I think I remember something of that kind," answered Belton.

"Well, that gal war my little sister, Mary," said Skinflint in a voice of emotion. "She war an angel upon the airth, and when I came home and my wife showed her to me, all safe and sound, and said that a hunter, calling himself Fireheels, had saved her and brought her thar, I blessed yer from the bottom o' my heart, and made up my mind that, ef ever I could sarve you a good turn in any way, that I'd do it!"

"The girl must be a pleasant companion to you," remarked the other. "I hope she is well."

"No more, fur the love o' God!" cried Skinflint, in a husky voice. "Don't speak of her!"

And, to the surprise of Belton, he saw a big tear trickling from the eye of this fierce man.

Without another word he seized the rope, descended to the ledge, and entered the cave, the opening of which had been concealed by the bushes.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MEETING.

NEXT morning Henderson, or rather Skinflint, the latter being his real name, emerged from a hut which he had made his habitation since coming to the settlement.

He went straight to Lorne's abode, and knocked at the door.

An old woman, employed there as housekeeper, answered the summons, and asking to see Mr. Lorne, Skinflint was shown into a handsomely furnished parlor.

His gray, whitish eyes gleamed fiercely as he glanced round him.

"Rayther bright—rayther bright, fur this part o' the country," he muttered. "Ther things I see must hev cost a heap o' money."

Lorne soon came.

"A fine trick you played me last night," he said, angrily.

"Don't understand yer."

"You didn't return, after leading us off from the very place where it seems Belton did go, that evening. It looks to me as if you did it on purpose."

"No, I made a mistake. After I left you, I saw a man stealing along, whom I thought was this Belton, and not until I'd tracked him a long distance, did I discover my mistake. When I came back to whar I had left yer, I found that yer war gone!"

"We waited and waited for nothing," said Lorne, "and might have staid there longer but for Tamina, who came, at last, and told us that he and Belton had met and fought, and that the white hunter had run away!"

A scarcely perceptible smile hovered about the corners of Skinflint's eyes.

"I repeat," said Lorne, "that I believe you deceived me on purpose, and I mean to have you arrested."

"Do yer?"

"Yes, I do."

"I don't think so. I hev a little letter fur yer. Hyar it is!"

As he spoke, Skinflint pulled from his pocket a crumpled bit of paper.

"My eddication hev been neglected, but I think that was writ by you, as yer name's signed at the bottom!"

Lorne took the note, at which he had no sooner gazed than his cheeks blanched and his hands trembled.

"Where did you get this?" he gasped.

"I found it near the holler, in the woods, whar they tell me the late murder was done!"

"Oh, yes, I remember. I dropped it from my pocket, the other day."

"What's the meanin' of its bein' *thar*? I only ask fur information, yer know, as I'm bound as well as you to ferret out all I kin about the crime."

"I dropped it, and the wind must have blown it to where you found it," quietly answered Lorne, who had recovered his composure.

"I'll mention that, after you hev me arrested."

"I do not really mean to have you taken up. I only said so to frighten you a little."

"Let me see, that note's writ to a gal or woman, whose first name is Ellen, I b'lieve."

"Oh, so you read the note?"

"I read it—yes, as well as I could. It appears to me that the person whom you writ to had begged you to come to her, fur in the note yer refuse to go, and, worse than that, threaten to kill her."

"There is no such threat," said Lorne, looking surprised. "Besides, I did not send the letter, after writing it."

"Yer say in it that, ef she attempts to come to you, after you refusin' to go to her, that one of you would vanish as if from the face of this 'arth!'"

Lorne laughed.

"Foolish fellow," said he, "by that I meant that I would clear out somewhere where she could not find me."

"Was that all? Whar is she, now?" inquired Skinflint, fixing the steady gaze of his piercing gray eyes full upon the face of Lorne.

The latter, however, preserved his composure.

"You ask me where she is? What business, pray, is that of yours?"

"Nothing pertik'lar; only when I half know a thing, I like to find out the rest."

"I repeat, then, that this does not in any way concern you as it is an affair of my own."

Skinflint bowed his head.

"If I were you, I would not tell any one about finding this note. It can do no good," rejoined Lorne.

"It's queer though, that I should hev found it by the hollow, whar that gal, Miss Danton, was killed!"

And, as he spoke, he again turned his white eyes upon the young man.

"I have told you I dropped the note."

"True! true!" said Skinflint, nodding his head, while, for an instant a puzzled look came over his face.

"Don't be afraid," said Lorne, misunderstanding the cause. "I promise you I'll not have you arrested."

"And couldn't you do something for me," said Skinflint—"that is ef I promise to say nothing about the note?"

"What do you mean?" cried Lorne, sharply. "My only reason for requesting you not to speak of finding that worthless old letter, is that it might provoke discussion, which would be annoying."

"And again—"

"Again what? Go on!"

"Queer suspicions sometimes spring up, yer know, from small foundation. Now you might say the wind blowed the letter whar it was found, when t'other folks would say it was dropped *thar*!"

"Good Heaven!" laughed Lorne. "What are you trying to make out?"

"Well, well, responded Skinflint; "I won't speak of it, then."

"You spoke of my doing something for you. What did you mean?"

"I thought yer might put me in the way of earnin' an honest livin'. Facts is, I hev'n't nothin' to do at present, an' ef I could only git hold of money enough to buy a pritty jewel like this," he added, suddenly pulling a diamond ring from Lorne's vest pocket—"I'd be a happy man."

"Give me that ring," said Lorne, quickly.

Skinflint, however, had stepped back, and was coolly examining the ring.

"Here," he then said, presenting it to Lorne. "Yer kin hev it. I s'pose *stolen* property is more val'ble than any other."

And as he spoke he turned his whitish-gray eyes full upon the face of the young man.

"Sir! Rascal! What do you mean?"

"Don't yer go fur to git in a passion. That was a pooty ring, but ef I war as rich as yer-self, I don't think I'd hev taken the trouble to stop the carriage and threaten to shoot the young lady who owned that jewel ef she refused to give it to me."

Lorne turned pale.

"What are you talking about?" he inquired.

"Come, now, let's understand each other,"

said Skinflint, laughing. "I see'd the bull thing. The mask didn't hide yer face enough fur me not to git a good squint at it. It all happened four days ago, and, though no one was killed this time, the news of the robbery is all over the country."

"You talk like a madman," said Lorne, with a surprise which perhaps was assumed. "How could you know my face, even had I been there, at night, with a mask on it?"

"Don't yer remember seeing a chap rolled up in a great overcoat, in one corner of the coach?" No one molested me, fur you all thought I was asleep, but sech warn't the case. You grabbed me by the throat, and I seemed fur to wake up, but I had the look of one who had been 'toxicated, which I warn't at all, but only put on, lettin' my head bob to one side, and seemin' to go to sleep again. Then you left me and went on robbin' the frightened young lady and her negro servant woman, which was the only passengers but me in the coach."

Lorne listened to these remarks with a wild, surprised look.

"I had a good chance to see yer face when you was so clus to me," continued Skinflint, "and it ain't easy fur me to forgit faces."

The speaker now watched the agitated visage of the young man with an amazed look.

"You's safe enough, fur all that," he continued, after a moment's pause, "fur who do you suppose would believe a ragamuffin like me, ag'in' sech a gentleman, as you, even ef I war to blab on yer, which I kin truly say I hev no intention of doin'. Had I been opposed to yer work, of course I'd hev told on yer, 'fore now, so yer needn't be so terrible down in the mouth about it. I don't know as I *blamed* yer for robbin'. It's an easy way to git a livin'."

The two men looked at each other.

"I think you and I will agree," said Lorne. "You told me you wanted employment."

"Anything fur an honest living!" and at the word 'honest,' Skinflint laughed.

"First of all, you must help me track that escaped murderer, and arrest him," said Lorne.

"I'll do that," was the emphatic reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

A REVELATION.

WHEN Belton entered the cave to which Skinflint had conducted him, he noticed that it was about fourteen feet square in area, and dimly lighted by crevices in the rocks above.

On the wall hung a couple of good rifles, and, among other things he saw there, he noticed a variety of articles for male attire, such as blouses, jackets, hunting-suits, and different kinds of hats.

In one corner a heap of soft skin seemed to invite repose.

Before lying down, the youth went to the opening of the cave and looked out.

By the clear light of the moon, he then beheld a spectacle, which at once roused him to action.

Seated on a cliff, not fifty paces off, was a slight, boyish form—evidently that of a traveler, as a wallet was slung at his side, and he carried a stout stick.

About twenty yards behind him, a large, ferocious wild-cat was stealing toward him, with noiseless pace, evidently to spring upon him, and make him its victim. The boy, apparently in a reverie, knew nothing of the presence of this foe, and Belton comprehended that he could not enlighten him on that point, without revealing his secret retreat.

Resolved to save the youth at all hazards, he descended, by means of his rope-ladder, from the cave, and, rifle in hand, advanced until he reached a favorable position for a shot. Then he fired, and his unerring bullet passing through the head of the animal, killed it instantly.

The person who had thus been saved by the timely shot of the young hunter, presently advancing to thank the young man, was fully revealed to the latter by the light of the moon, which was at this place unobscured.

Apparently, not more than seventeen years of age, he was of slight form, with a profusion of light, brown hair falling, in natural ringlets, to his shoulders. His eyes were very dark, and his face was extremely pale. It was a handsome face, with its fine, regular features, and yet it was almost haggard in expression, while, about the mouth, young as he was, were lines as of deep suffering.

A slouched hat which the stranger had worn he had raised with one slender hand, while he extended the other toward his rescuer.

"Thanks," he said, in a musical, boyish voice. "You have saved my life."

"And glad I am I came up in time to do it," said Belton.

"I did not know there were such wild-cats in this part of the country. I thought the only dangerous creatures hereabout were robbers."

"Not only robbers but murderers, too," responded the hunter. "Probably you have heard of the murder of Mr. Danton's daughter—the sweetest gal in these parts!"

And as he spoke Belton heaved a deep sigh. The stranger answered, in a hollow voice: "I have heard of it."

"Yes, and I believe, now, *thar's* devils on the face o' this earth, though I used to doubt it. The man who murdered that gal must hev been one on 'em."

"How do you know it was a man?" inquired the other, in the same hollow voice as before.

Belton was a little startled by the question.

"Shorely no woman could hev done it?" he said.

"Women have done such things," replied the other.

The hunter looked closely at the speaker. His dark eyes gleamed coldly and steadily—his expression was very sad.

"How long hev you been in these parts?" inquired Belton.

"Not long. I would rather you would ask me no questions."

"But—but—perhaps you've not heard that a certain young man—a hunter, was arrested on suspicion—that he escaped from prison and that law officers and others are now searching fur him?"

"It is too bad, since he is not guilty! No. I had not heard of that."

"It is true; but you say you *know* he is not guilty! How do you know that?"

"I said I'd rather you would ask me no questions."

"Yes, but when I tell you that I am the person accused of the crime, perhaps you'll excuse me for not complying with your wishes."

The dark eyes of the stranger scintillated in the light of the moon, as he started and looked at the speaker.

"You, my rescuer, accused of that murder?"

"Alas! *thar's* a fact—I am."

"The accusation is false! I *know* who killed the girl!"

"Then, for the Lord's sake! go and tell the justice, and free me from the imputation!" cried the other.

At that moment half a dozen forms were seen approaching, with Lorne at their head.

"Here he is, men! We have him, now!" shouted the leader.

And, as he spoke, he leveled a pistol at Belton, who had not yet thought of reloading his piece, calling upon him to surrender.

In a moment, however, the stranger, as quick as a flash, raised his head from behind the rock near which he had been seated.

The position he occupied now was between Belton and the pistol, and as he stood with his hat off, his whole visage was distinctly revealed to Lorne.

No sooner did the latter see the face thus presented to his gaze, than he staggered back, his pistol dropping to the ground.

The next moment, dodging among the rocks, the boy glided off, while Belton also bounded along in another direction.

The hunter finally gained his retreat and drew up the rope-ladder, while the voices of his pursuers yet sounded in the distance.

He thought more of the person whom he had saved from the wild-cat than he did of Lorne and his people.

The lad had said he knew who had committed the crime, and this declaration inspired him with a feeling of hope. The young stranger, knowing that Belton had been falsely accused of the crime, would certainly go to the justice and make known the truth.

But the conduct of the youth had been very strange. After Lorne, for some mysterious reason, had been startled by the face of this lad, the latter had run away, as though he, too, was anxious to conceal himself!

What could it mean?

If he found it necessary to keep himself hidden, what chance was there that he would venture to make any revelation to the justice?

"I must find him and have further conversation with him," muttered the hunter.

After a restless night, he rose early and tried to partake of some of the provisions in the retreat.

While doing so he heard the noise of a stone, thrown up among the bushes over the entrance of the cave.

Peering cautiously forth, he was surprised to see Lona, the Indian girl, on the rock below. She looked carefully around her, as if to make

sure that she was not observed; then she made a motion for Belton to lower his ladder.

He did so, and the girl soon was in the cave. "Glad see all safe," she said. "The Fireheels did wrong to leave the Omaha camp when he did. He should have known that Tamina was laying a trap for him."

"Had I known it, my good friend, you kin be shore I wouldn't hev gone. But how did you find it all out, for I reckon you now know everything about it?"

"The hunter is right. Lona met Skinflint, and he told her."

"Did he send you hyar?"

"It is true; with this."

And she presented a scrap of paper to Belton.

It was as follows:

"DEAR FRIEND:—Things is goen on well. I'm shadowin' a sart'in person, and hope fore long to cl'ar yer from the accoosation of murder. Don't you fret ef yer don't see, fur sum time, yer best friend,
SKINFLINT."

"Whar is Skinflint now?" inquired Belton.

"Lona cannot tell. She met him in the woods, yesterday, and he told her all about you, and gave her this note."

"He is keen enough to see that you kin be trusted."

"It is true. There is nothing Lona would not do for the white hunter," answered the girl, in a low voice.

Belton now described to her the mysterious stranger he had seen the night before, and related all that had happened on that occasion.

She listened eagerly. Her eyes shone like stars.

"Lona very glad," she said. "Fireheels soon all right. The white stranger will go to the justice and tell all."

"Thar's the trouble! I don't know whether he will or not. Perhaps, ef you could find him, you might persuade him to."

"Lona will find him," the girl answered. "And she will get him to go with her before the justice."

Without another word she quickly descended the ladder, and as Belton drew it up, he saw her disappear among the rocks on the other side of the valley beyond.

CHAPTER IX.

A SURPRISE.

On the night following the visit of Lona to Belton's cave, two persons wearing masks stood in a clump of shrubbery near the road then usually taken by the mail-coach from Virginia City to Salt Lake.

"A wagon, you say?" remarked the taller of the two.

"Yes, a wagon—a plain wagon, and yet with fifty thousand dollars in gold-dust hidden in a bag under the front seat."

"And no guard?"

"Yes, half a dozen miners, but there's more than a bullet for each of them as soon as they get to the turn of the road yonder, near which our ten men are posted."

"Good; tell yer what, Lorne, the better I know yer, the greater's my admiration of yer."

"Never mind your admiration, Henderson. Now that you have become one of my band, your business is simply to obey me, and to help me in cases where pluck is required."

"Well then, after the miners hev all been shot what's to be done with the bodies?"

"A few sharp spades will soon dispose of them. The ground is soft and holes are soon dug."

"But the wagon and horses?"

"We'll set fire to the prairie grass, and burn them up—horses and all."

"Why, thunder! yer's a perfect genius!" said Skinflint. "But we've been heer an hour, and I don't yet heer the wagon comin'."

"It'll be along soon."

"I think I heer it now. S'posin' I go and see if I kin 'twig' it?"

"All right, but be careful the miners don't see you watching them, or they may suspect something."

Skinflint glided away as stealthily as a shadow, making no noise with his soft moccasins.

He was soon out of Lorne's sight, in the shrubbery which skirted the road.

Lorne listened, and, in a short time, he heard the wagon coming. It soon reached the turn of the road, but the outlaw heard no shot fired.

Puzzled to account for this, he crept toward the spot where he had posted his ten men.

He saw them peering through the bushes at the wagon, which had stopped, but which apparently, contained no riders!

"Come, you fools, why don't you rush out and see what's the matter?" said the outlaw chief to his men.

"We think ther's some trick fur us!" answered one. "Them miners might be hid in the bottom of the wagin, in wait to surprise us."

"To surprise you? and what of it? Are there notten of you?" "Come, now, let us see what the matter is," continued Lorne as he moved, pistols in hand, toward the wagon.

His gang followed him.

He got upon a wheel-spoke and looked in.

As he did so, a man thrust his head from under some canvas where he had been lying.

It was Skinflint.

"Halloa!" cried Lorne in astonishment.

"Halloa!" echoed Skinflint.

"What does this mean?" said the other.

"What does *what* mean?" inquired Skinflint.

"You being here and no miners."

"No miners?"

"Yes, the miners we were going to rob, and the bag of gold-dust!" cried Lorne impatiently.

"Miners and bag of gold-dust?" said Skinflint, scratching his head in a puzzled fashion. Then, as his eyes lighted up, he said:

"It seems to me I *do* remember somethin' of the kind!"

"Come, explain yourself," said Lorne.

Skinflint appeared to be reflecting.

"I hev it now," he suddenly cried. "I went to see ef the wagin was comin' didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, the miners must hev see'd me peerin' at 'em, fur I remember somethin' strikin' me on the head, and then I knowed no more till I found myself in this yere wagin, jist before you looked in it."

"You don't know what became of the miners?"

"No, but I reckon they've gone to git help from a huntin'-party not fur off, which I noticed in the moonlight 'fore I was hit, on one of the hills yonder. They must hev see'd your men lurkin' in the brush, and hev guessed what they were arter."

"And so made off with the gold, first putting you in the wagon?"

"Yes, fur safe keepin', I reckon," said Skinflint.

"What made the horses stop, as they have just done?"

"Yer must ask the hosses 'bout *that*," replied Skinflint.

"It seems very strange," cried Lorne.

"Stranger things hev happened 'fore now. Ker-whoop! hyar they come, and we'll all be hanged ef we don't take leg-bail!" added Skinflint, as a distant shout was heard, and a band of hunters, followed by the miners, were seen approaching from the direction of the hill he had pointed out.

"Come, men, we'll have to streak it now!" said Lorne.

Followed by his companions, he hurried through a narrow gully, leading into the heart of a dense thicket.

Finally the gang entered a rocky cave, which they often used for a temporary shelter.

The opening they closed with a bowlder, which would prevent any person near the place from guessing that a cave was there.

Skinflint accompanied the others to their place, whence the gang finally set out for this regular rendezvous among the mountains.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERIOUS WITNESS.

AFTER leaving Belton, Lona repaired to her camp.

A few minutes later Tamina also made his appearance.

The girl looked at him closely.

"Why does Lona watch me?" he said, coming close to her side.

"Lona would like to know where Tamina has been," she answered.

The truth was she suspected that the youth had been tracking her, and she thought she could make sure of it by his manner when she questioned him.

It is nothing to Lona *where* he has been," was the sullen answer.

She at once inferred that, missing her from the camp, Tamina had tried to find her, but had failed.

She went to her tent, and soon was fast asleep.

Tamina also repaired to his tent, but not to sleep. His eyes were flashing like coals of fire, and his mouth was set as if with some fierce purpose.

"The time has at last come!" he muttered.

"Tamina is no longer an Omaha. No, his heart

is turned from the tribe who have given shelter to his worst enemy. His mother was of the Snake tribe. The Snakes are now the foes of the Omahas, but they shall be the friends of Tamina. He will go to the Snakes, and there he will seek another squaw. But Lona shall never be the wife of the white hunter. I have said it. I will prove my words."

An hour later, when all the Indians in the camp except himself were asleep, he stole to Lona's tent. Looking round him to make sure he was not observed, he glided into the shelter.

The girl was fast asleep. Through a small crevice in the tent, the light of the moon fell upon her long, black hair, which streamed over her shoulders.

For a moment the young Indian gazed upon her; then he drew a long knife from his belt, and stealthily approached her.

Kneeling down by her side, he raised his deadly weapon, holding it directly above her heart, so that the blow should be sure and fatal.

The blade was about to be driven to the haft in Lona's beautiful bosom, when the Indian felt a grasp like that of steel upon his wrist, and his hand was pulled aside, causing the knife to descend into the ground.

Turning, the savage beheld the visage of Skinflint.

"You war out of yer reckonin', that time, Injun!" cried the hunter.

"Ugh! Knife go in *you*, first!" grunted Tamina, enraged.

But, ere he could lift the weapon, he felt the cold muzzle of a revolver at his head.

"I'm not onprepared," said Skinflint, quietly.

The noise awoke Lona, who at once rose, staring, in surprise, at the two intruders.

"What means this?" she said.

"It means that this chap war a-goin' to kill yer by stickin' yer, as ef yer war nothin' more'n a pig. I hev been follerin' him to see which way he went, thinkin' he might be tryin' to cut up some shine I didn't want him to."

He gave Lona a significant glance as he spoke, and she understood him, knowing that he had tracked Tamina, in order to see if he should detect the cave in which Belton was hidden.

"Arter follerin' him some time, I saw him fetch up in this camp. I hung about a little while, when, the fust thing I knowed, he comes out of his own tent and makes fur yourn. I suspected he meant mischief, and it seems I was right. Glad I came in time to purvent his work."

"So Tamina would kill Lona?" said the girl, addressing the youth. "Why did he—?"

But, ere she could finish the sentence, the Indian, by a quick movement, broke from Skinflint's grasp, which had been a little relaxed, and rushed out of the tent.

"Let him go," said the hunter, carelessly, to the girl. "I reckon you'll find him good rid-dance. But yer better be keeful, as he may hang about hyar, tryin' to git another blow at yer with his knife."

"Lona is not afraid," she answered. "But she thanks the white man for saving her life."

Skinflint having spoken a few more words, took his departure, when the brave Indian girl, again lying down, went to sleep, as if nothing had happened to disturb her.

At dawn she rose, and after breakfast, started on a hunt for the mysterious youth, who had met Belton, on the night before, and had said that he knew who had killed the young lady found murdered in the woods.

Lona after a long and diligent search, found certain tracks of small feet on the ground.

She looked at them narrowly as she followed the trail, until at length she lost all trace of them where they terminated among rocks.

She, however, kept on, but she had not proceeded far when the ring of a rifle saluted her ears, not far off, and she heard a bullet pass over her head.

Turning, she beheld Tamina, making off at full speed, holding a smoking rifle in his hand.

"So he is determined to kill Lona," muttered the girl. "We shall see. The Omaha braves shall soon be on his track!"

As she spoke she saw a youthful stranger whom she had not previously noticed, running in a direction opposite to that pursued by the Indian.

That this was the person whom Belton had spoken of, and wished her to see, she did not doubt, so, with the speed of a deer, she ran after, and soon overtook him.

The lad, as she confronted him, pulled his slouched hat further down over his eyes.

"Lona would speak with the white boy," she said.

"No need of thanks," was the answer. "I saw him aim the rifle at you, and fortunately, I was near enough to run up behind him and knock up the piece, just as he was pulling the trigger, thus causing the bullet to pass over your head! Then I made off, and was glad to see him go the other way, for I thought he would try to wreak vengeance on me for saving you."

"That is why he ran," answered Lona, pointing to a party of the Omahas, who were approaching.

"I am glad of it. I have seen enough of death!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and turned pale as he spoke.

"Where has the white boy seen it?" inquired Lona.

The youth started, and looked at her keenly from under the rim of his slouched hat.

"Why do you ask?" he inquired.

"Lona would like to know. She believes that he means the murder of the white girl when he speaks of death. Is not that so?"

"Yes, you are right," the other answered, after a moment's hesitation.

"Did the white boy see who murdered the girl?"

"I did."

"Who was it?"

A flush, as of anger, appeared on the lad's cheeks.

"You question me too closely," he said, impatiently.

"The life of an innocent man is in danger," replied Lona. "He has been accused of the crime. You know whom I mean. You saw him last night."

"That young hunter?"

"Yes. You know he did not do the deed?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then, to clear him, and get him out of trouble, the white boy should go before the justice, and tell *who* killed the girl."

The lad bowed his head.

"No, I cannot do that," he said.

"The white boy should do it. It would be right."

"Still I cannot."

"You *shall* do it!" cried Lona, with energy, stamping one little foot.

"You cannot compel me against my will."

And he turned away, which, however, he had scarcely done, when, taking a small willow whistle from her pocket, Lona blew upon it a shrill blast.

In an instant the band of Omahas, who had started in pursuit of Tamina, turned and hastened toward the girl.

The boy, seeing them coming, quickened his pace along the inclined precipice which he was obliged to descend to reach an unobstructed path below.

By the time he arrived there, however, the Omahas were only a few paces off.

"Do not hurt the white boy!" shouted Lona, "but let him be made prisoner!"

The youth, perceiving he could not escape, stood motionless.

Lona came up as her people surrounded him.

"Why has Lona had the pale-face captured?" inquired Wono, the chief. "We are at peace with the whites."

She soon explained.

"He must be taken to the justice," she said.

"He should be made to tell all he knows about the murder."

"Good!" said the chief. "The Omahas are glad if they can help their friend, Fireheels."

"You may as well let me go," said the boy.

"I shall tell nothing."

The Indians, however, accompanied by Lona, conducted the boy to Logville.

The appearance of the band with their prisoner created some excitement among the inhabitants of the settlement, and a crowd of men and boys followed them to the house of Justice Bole.

The latter came to the door.

"What is this?" he inquired.

Lona explained, and two of the Indians, followed by the girl, were permitted to lead the prisoner into one of the rooms.

"What is your name?" inquired Bole.

"Charles Forner," was the answer.

"You saw the person who killed the young lady—saw him kill her?"

"I did."

"And you know his name?"

"I do."

"What was it?"

"I refuse to answer that question."

"Was it Frank Belton?"

"No."

"You refuse to tell who it was?"

"I do," was the firm reply.

"Do you know that such refusal is a crime—that you can be locked up for it?"

"I am aware of that."

The justice scratched his nose thoughtfully.

"I have a suspicion," said he, "that this is all a trumped-up story to screen that hunter, Frank Belton, who, it is evident, is really the guilty party. Do you know where Belton is?"

"I do not."

"Humph! I have another suspicion," continued the justice, looking keenly at the youth, "and that is, that it was through your connivance this Belton escaped from prison."

"I had nothing to do with it," was the reply.

"I must have my friend, Mr. Lorne, here, to see what he thinks of this affair," said Bole.

He turned to his clerk, a boy of about seventeen, and told him to bring Lorne to the house.

The clerk at once departed on his mission, Bole having first drawn him to one side and whispered to him.

A few moments later two stout men appeared.

"You will keep guard over this boy in the next room," he said. "You can withdraw," he continued, addressing Lona and the two Indians. "We have no further use for you."

The Indians left the room and went back to their camp.

The windows of the apartment to which young Forner was now conducted, overlooked a path, bordered by shrubbery, leading through a garden to a small gate, in a high board fence.

Both windows were open, affording a view of the distant mountain scenery, now growing dim in the twilight.

Each of the men placed himself by an open window, and looked out.

"Here comes Mr. Lorne," said one, a quarter of an hour later.

Forner started, and turned deathly pale. He gazed at the figure of the youth who was approaching, until it was hidden by a neighboring fence.

Then he bounded to one of the windows, leaping through it ere the man stationed there could raise a hand to stop him.

The window was but nine feet above the ground, and the boy, unhurt by his leap, sped rapidly along.

"Stop, there, stop!" shouted one of the men, raising a pistol and pointing it toward the shrubbery, "or I'll fire. After him, Jack!" he added to his companion.

But ere Jack could go, the door was quickly opened by the justice.

"What's the matter?"

"That boy has escaped," answered the man with the pistol. "Shall I fire at him?"

"No use now," answered the justice. "You would not be apt to hit him, as you cannot see him."

"I think I can catch up to him," said the man who had been called Jack.

He was about to spring to the ground when Bole stopped him.

"No use," he repeated. "It was all a trumped-up affair—that story of his, anyway. I will see about looking him up to-morrow."

The men withdrew, after which the justice, rather pleased than otherwise at Forner's escape, returned to his room, rubbing his hands.

Soon after Lorne appeared, and to him Bole described what had lately taken place.

The face of the youth fairly turned blue.

"You say he declared that he saw the person who killed the girl?"

"Just so," and the justice laughed incredulously. "Of course, it is a story invented to screen Belton—the really guilty party."

"Oh, of course," said Lorne; "or else the witness you speak of must have been a little insane."

"He appeared to be sane enough. At all events, he was enough so to get away."

And again the justice laughed.

"You have sent no one in pursuit of him?"

"Certainly not. It was not necessary. To a person of my penetration, the whole affair was plain enough. We do not want this boy. His testimony would be worthless—hey?"

"Of course it would. In my opinion, there can be no doubt that Belton is the guilty party. That Indian girl, Lona, was always friendly to the hunter, and she has got this boy to come and testify solely for the purpose of shielding Belton."

"My own opinion exactly."

"Still, if you think the boy really told the truth," added Lorne. "You—"

"No, no, sir. It would be mere waste of time."

"You say he would not tell *who* the person was that—that he saw kill the girl?"

"Exactly—that of itself proves there was no truth in his story."

"Yes, I did not think of that."

"In my capacity of justice I think of *everything*," said Bole, with an important air. "Not the slightest trifle escapes my notice."

"True! you certainly are well fitted for your position."

"And I may say," responded Bole, cordially grasping Lorne's hand—"that *your* appreciation of my worth is of more consequence to me even than my salary!"

"I am glad to hear you say so," responded Lorne, "for most of the people of Logville being poor, there has been some talk of reducing your salary a trifle, and—"

"Not to be thought of—not to be thought of for a moment!" cried the justice, excitedly. "This idea must be put down—must be crushed at once!"

And Bole stamped the floor, as if to crush it, then and there.

"I was going to say that I would use my utmost efforts to oppose the measure," said Lorne, "and not only that, but would try to have your wages increased!"

Bole's visage fairly beamed.

"If ever there was a man of unsullied honor, sir—a man of the most spotless integrity—a man of—"

"That will do, sir, you overpower me," said Lorne.

A few moments later he had left the house.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CHAINED CAPTIVE.

"THE hypocrite," thought Lorne, as he walked along. "Still he is just the man I want to hold the position he does, and I must try to increase his salary. But he is a disgusting wretch in some things."

The youth moved on until he reached his house. He remained there only a few minutes, when, having whispered to the old woman who acted as his servant and housekeeper, he quitted the building. He bent his way toward the mountains, and as he hurried on, he was not aware that he was being followed.

It was the boy, Forner, who endeavoring to keep him in sight, glided along behind him, now and then dodging under a bush or a rocky projection, when it chanced that the young outlaw turned his head.

Finally, going into an old, dilapidated-looking hut, Lorne disappeared from the gaze of his follower.

The boy, however, kept on, and, at last, when close to the habitation, he peered into it.

But he could discover nothing of the person who had entered it.

Surprised at this, Forner looked around him.

The light of the moon streamed into the hut, but the lad could see no place which could conceal the form of the outlaw.

He looked at the ground, which was of hard clay, perfectly smooth, apparently, without a break.

"This is strange enough," he thought.

He was about to go out, and conceal himself behind a rock, in a position which would afford him a view of the interior of the hut, when he fancied he heard low voices directly beneath his feet.

Instantly the truth was made evident to him. There was a trap door, probably covered by the hard clay, in the floor.

He waited until he could no longer hear the voices, when, stooping, he felt about the ground.

At length half buried in the clay, he touched a piece of rope.

Pulling upon this, he raised a small trap-door, which, as he had divined, had been hidden by the clay that covered it.

The boy now beheld the floor of a pit, about four feet beneath him.

He descended into it, to find himself in front of an opening, beyond which was a passage, slanting downward. A dim light showed him that this passage was rocky, evidently leading into some chamber or vault below, where a lamp shed a faint light.

Moving along the passage, he soon came to this vault, and saw the lamp, which was placed in a niche in the rocky wall.

The sound of voices fell upon his ear. He saw a door and, peering through a crevice, he beheld a large cavern, in which were seated about twenty fierce-looking young men, with Lorne among them.

"A robbers' den," thought Forner.

He had noticed another door in the side of the passage he had traversed, and now, seeing Lorne approaching, he darted toward it and tried to open it.

But the door was locked, and finding he could not open it, the boy shrunk into an alcove in the wall, hoping he would thus escape the notice of the outlaw, in case he should come into the passage.

In fact Lorne did come out. He walked as far as the door which the lad had found locked, and taking a key from his pocket, he opened it.

Forner instantly emerging from the alcove, followed the youth, who was now moving downward along a rocky passage which was in total darkness.

At length he paused in a small vault, and the boy also stopping, heard the clanking of a chain.

He could just make out the dim outline of a female form in front of Lorne, who stood opposite a corner of the dungeon.

"I hope it is a friend this time who has come to free me," was uttered, in the piteous voice of a girl.

"Yes, I am a friend to you, as you well know," answered Lorne. "Consent to what I proposed and you shall be freed."

"Ah, Heaven help me; it is the same old story," said the girl, "but my answer is the same as before. You will never obtain from me any other!"

"You will die here."

"Be it so. Welcome real death, rather than a living death with a man I detest."

"You shall have your wish. I will not loosen you from the chain—will not free you from the vault, unless you consent to go away with me and become my wife."

At these words Forner clutched a protuberance on the rock, as if to save himself from falling. He felt dizzy, and pressed one hand tightly upon his breast.

"I will make you a good husband," continued Lorne. "As you know, I am a man of means, and your every wish shall be gratified."

"Away!" was the reply. "Leave me, and never come near me again. I accept death, rather than you!"

Lorne turned away with a cry of anger, and so quick were his movements that Forner, standing with his back pressed in a hollow of the wall, had no time to make his escape, as he had intended to do ere the young man should start on his return.

Owing to the gloom the boy was not seen, and the outlaw left the passage as he had come, locking the door after him.

Forner bowed his head upon his hands and shuddered.

"Who is there?" came the faint voice of the chained girl.

The boy did not answer.

The question was repeated.

"It is I," replied the youth.

"You are not one of the band?"

"No."

"Then, for God's sake—"

Ere she could say more, the door at the end of the passage was cautiously opened, and some one entered.

Forner shrunk close to the wall until the person who had come in had passed him; then he glided to the door and made his escape.

He soon gained the hut, and leaving it, he hurried along.

"Another, yes there is another!" he muttered, clinching his hands and speaking in a voice of intense anguish. "I care not what becomes of me now. Better to end this misery at once!" he added, as the noise of a rushing torrent ahead fell upon his ears.

A few minutes later he gained the bank of the torrent.

"Now, then, farewell to life!" he cried, as he plunged into the stream.

The swift waters bore him along toward the brink of a precipice, over which they flowed, and in another moment he must have been dashed to death upon the rocks below, had not his arms been seized by some one near the edge of the cataract.

This person pulled him upon a flat rock, and the moon, which was now shining, showed him that his preserver was the Indian girl, Lona.

"Why did you save me? Why not let me meet the fate which was of my own seeking?" he inquired.

"The white boy talks like a squaw! Why should a boy of his years want to end his life?"

"Do not ask me," groaned Forner. "Believe me, though, when I say that you have done me no favor by saving my life."

"The boy has a soft heart. One of his years

should not be crushed by sorrow. It is very strange!"

"Tell me if you can," said Forner, clasping his hands tightly—"tell me *who she is*!"

"Of whom does the young pale-face speak?"

The eyes of the boy gleamed wildly.

"Of the girl the girl the one in that rocky dungeon!" he cried.

"Lona knows of no dungeon. Has the white boy lost his mind?"

"No! no! I tell you she is there!" repeated Forner, "and he wants her—he wants her to be his wife."

Then he went on raving incoherently, and Lona perceived that he was in a delirium.

"Come," she said, gently.

She grasped his hands, he staggered to his feet, and the Indian girl conducted him to the camp of the Omahas, which had lately been moved nearer to the mountains. There he was placed on a couch of skins in a tent, and a skillful doctor of the tribe attended him.

For three days he was in a burning fever, but on the fourth he was much better. He wanted to leave the Indian camp, but Lona, fearing that he might again attempt to destroy himself, advised her people to persuade him to remain with them.

The Indians, therefore, would not let him go, urging as a reason, that he was too weak to do so.

The remarks of the boy about a girl in a dungeon had greatly impressed Lona. Although he had spoken while delirious, yet she could not help thinking that there might be some truth in his statements, and as he had more than once mentioned the name of Lorne, her curiosity and interest had been aroused.

On making a search, she discovered the hut which, among other things, the lad had mentioned during his ravings.

"Lona always thought Lorne was a bad man, and now she is almost sure of it," muttered the girl on the morning she saw the hut. "The boy spoke of a band of men with him, in a rocky cave. Those cannot be good men. They must be robbers."

She entered the hut and looked about her, but, as Forner had not mentioned the secret trap-door, she did not discover it.

Leaving the hut, she mounted the high rock, against which it was built, and examined it keenly.

Finally she saw a crevice or fissure in the top of it, large enough to admit a slender human body.

She knelt, and looked down into it, but all was darkness below, so that she could not see to the bottom of it.

She went back to the camp, procured a long rope, and with it returned to the rock.

Fastening one end of the rope to a projection, she descended into the cavity.

The sides of this were so rugged and contained so many knobs that she might almost have climbed down them without the assistance of the rope.

After going about thirty feet, she touched ground.

The light here was very dim. She found herself in a large vault, which, beyond her position, was in complete darkness.

Cautiously moving forward, she fancied she heard heavy breathing, as of some person in a profound sleep.

She kept on, and finally took from her pocket a match, which she lighted.

The brief gleam fell upon the face and form of a young girl, who, with a chain about her middle, lay fast asleep on a pallet of straw.

A low cry of astonishment escaped Lona's lips, and the match dropping from her hand, was extinguished.

At the same moment, she heard a door open and the outlaw, Lorne, with a lamp, entered the passage, the rays of the light falling full upon the person of the Indian girl, at once revealing her to his gaze.

She sprang to the place where her rope hung, but, ere she could commence her ascent, Lorne was there pointing a pistol toward her.

"Hah! you are nicely caged, and you shall not leave this place in a hurry," he said. "Come down, before I fire."

Lona dropped lightly to the ground.

"I know you, now. You bad man!" she said, eying him steadily.

The young outlaw laughed.

"You'll have to keep that to yourself, at any rate," he replied. "I have you in my clutches, and I am glad of it."

Lona was unarmed. The youth, with some cords, picked up from one side of the vault, made her hands fast behind her back. Then he

pushed her into a pit, about seven feet deep, near the spot where the two stood.

He next climbed by the rope the girl had used to the top of the rock.

"I must stop up this place," he muttered. "I thought to leave the opening as it is, for the sake of the fresh air, but I think a less quantity of air will do."

He rolled a boulder over the fissure, so that only two narrow crevices, on each side of it, were left; then he returned by way of the hut to the dungeon, which he had previously entered to convey some food to his girl captive. The food consisting of bread and water, he deposited by the slumberer then he left the dungeon, locking, as usual, the heavy wooden door after him.

CHAPTER XII.

A RUSE.

It was Skinflint whom Forner had noticed, entering the passage leading into the dungeon.

The darkness had prevented the youth from seeing his face, and, had also hindered the man from detecting the boy as he crouched against the wall.

Scarcely had the lad reached the hut, when Lorne returned to the passage, looking down as if searching for something.

As he approached the door leading into the dungeon, he was startled to perceive that it was ajar.

He at once entered, to distinguish the outlines of a man's form, ahead of him.

In a moment he had pounced upon this man, seizing him by the collar.

"Who are you?" he cried.

"What don't yer know yer own friend?" said Skinflint.

"What are you doing here, Henderson? What right had you to come to this place? You found my key, which I dropped, and have been looking for."

"Yes, I found yer key, and that's how I got in heer," was the answer. "Let go my collar, ef yer please."

"Give me that key, or I'll throttle you!" said Lorne.

"Easy, thar, easy," cried Skinflint, as he pressed the muzzle of a revolver against Lorne's temple. "By the 'tarnal! ef yer don't let go of me, yer's a dead dog!"

Lorne at once released the hunter.

"Give me the key," he repeated.

"In good time," answered Skinflint, but fust I want to hev a little talk with yer. Who is that gal I kin jest make out, ahead on us, tied to the wall, with a chain round her?"

"That's none of your business. It is my own affair!"

"Quick! light a lamp, and let me see her, or it'll be the worse fur yer!"

Lorne, who had left his pistols in the other cave, reluctantly complied. He lighted a small lamp, in a bracket on the wall.

The features of the girl now were plainly revealed to Skinflint.

"Who are you, miss?" he inquired.

But the young woman, who stood leaning heavily against the wall, made no reply.

"I see; the poor gal, whoever she is, has fainted; her eyes are closed."

"She is my sister—a person who is subject to fits. I'm obliged to keep her chained in this way, for being insane, she is very violent and would kill me if she were at liberty."

"Humph!" grunted Skinflint. "That's a strange way to treat a sister. I wouldn't treat mine so!"

Lorne was startled by the fierce expression of his companion's eyes as he said this.

"I think we'd better set the gal free," continued Skinflint advancing toward her.

"No, no," said Lorne. "I tell you she would give no trouble."

"We'll see, at any rate," was the answer.

"It goes a'gin' my nater to hev a poor thing like that chained to a wall."

As he spoke he gained the girl's side, and looked closely at her face.

"You say she's yer sister, and she doesn't look a bit like yer," cried the hunter.

Something came whizzing through the air, and the speaker dropped to the ground, senseless.

Lorne had picked up a stone, and had hurled it at Skinflint, with a force which would have caused it to crush his skull, had not the missile struck his head slantingly.

"Hah! hah! my fine fellow," muttered Lorne.

"We'll see if you'll have your own way here!"

He looked down at the prostrate man, and wrenched from his grasp the revolver he still held.

Then he pointed the weapon at the hunter's head.

"One pull on the trigger would send him to eternity!" he muttered. "I have had my doubts of the fellow's good faith, from the first. He knows too much about me, and—"

At that moment some one touched him on the arm, and, turning the young outlaw beheld one of his band.

"You must not kill him, captain," said the man.

"How do you know I intended to, Jasper?"

"You looked as if you was a-goin' to, that's all I know; but you mustn't—at least not until he pays me the debt he owes me."

"A debt?"

"Yes," answered Jasper, "he owes me a hundred dollars, which he lost at cards with me, this very day!"

"Fool! do you think he ever meant to pay you?"

"Oh, yes, I've perfect faith in his honor."

"Honor!" repeated Lorne, laughing, "who talks of honor, here?"

"There's no doubt 'bout his bein' an honorable thief," was the reply.

"Well," replied Lorne, "I must own that I had thoughts of killing him, for, in my opinion, he's a sort of traitor. We must shut him up somewhere, or the first thing we know, he'll be betraying us all."

"What makes you think so?"

"I have watched him sharply."

"Where shall we put him?"

"We will lock him up, for the present, in one of the rooms of the cave. Go and bring some men to carry him there."

Jasper went away, to soon return with several stout fellows.

They picked up Skinflint, and conveyed him through the larger cave into one not much wider than a baker's oven. It was provided with a wooden door, which was now shut upon the senseless man and locked.

"There!" said Lorne. "Now we will have a talk about the fellow, and I think I here have evidence enough to show that he is a traitor."

At these words all the gang gathered about the speaker. They were fierce-looking fellows, most of them under twenty-two years of age.

Lorne, who had rummaged Skinflint's pockets ere he was carried to the rocky cell, had found an old note-book, on one of the leaves of which was written:

"Things is workin'—reckin I will spot this cussed chap—fore long!"

When Lorne read this, he said that the "chap" stood for him and that by spotting him, the man must have meant he would betray him.

There were different opinions among the gang on this subject, but the majority thought their captain was right.

"We'll talk the thing over until to-morrow," said Lorne, "and I have no doubt you will all conclude that our best course will be to get him out of the way!"

Meanwhile Skinflint, still lay senseless in the cell.

Some minutes elapsed ere he came to.

At first he was a little confused, but he soon remembered what had lately happened.

As the gang spoke in loud voices, outside, he could hear the proposition made to take his life, on the morrow.

His light gray eyes flashed and a scornful smile added to the ugliness of his visage.

"We'll see about that," he muttered. "At any rate, thar'll be some trouble 'fore it's done!"

As he spoke he pulled from a concealed pocket another revolver, precisely like the one which had been taken from him.

"I didn't come into this 'farnal den 'thout takin' a few precautions," he continued.

Late at night he heard some one unlocking his door. The next moment the young ruffian, Jasper, entered.

He was armed with a pistol.

"Halloa!" said Skinflint. "I s'pose yer've come to kill me. I thought it was to be put off until to-morrow!"

"I've not come fur that. I've come fur the payment of what you owe me. If they should kill you to-morrow, how am I to git my money?"

"It's a wonder to me Lorne let yer come in heer."

"Mum's the word. He's gone out, and most of the gang is asleep. Fortunately I had a key of my own to fit the lock of the door, as the room used to be mine for sleepin' in."

"Suppose I give you your hundred dollars. Will you make no alarm ef I try to git away?"

"You couldn't git off. No use of yer thinkin' of that, fur to-night ther's some of the gang on guard in the outer hut."

"Never mind that."

"Well, then, it's ag'in' my principles to let yer go. It wouldn't do. Still, ef yer could hand over three hundred, or promise yer'd give it to me in the futur', I might think over what yer say."

"You ask too much. I hev yer hundred dollars snug enough, but jest please shet that door, while I count it out to yer."

Jasper closed the door, when, plunging a hand into a secret pocket of his coat, Skinflint drew forth a roll of bills.

He counted out a hundred dollars.

"Heer you are," he said. "Now I hope you'll let me go."

"No, none of that," said Jasper, as he locked the door and put the key in his pocket. "Yer seem flush of money, Henderson. Come, now, how much may yer hev about yer?"

"It's none o' yer bizness, but I don't mind tellin' an honest chap like yerself that I hev five hundred about me in all."

"And do yer mean to say yer life ain't worth two hundred? Come, give me that, and I'll let yer go."

As he spoke there was in his eyes a peculiar expression which did not escape the notice of Skinflint. It was a fierce, greedy look, like that of a wolf.

"Poor fool," thought Skinflint, "he thinks I don't see through him. Thar goes his hand now in his breast-pocket, feelin' fur the stiletto he carries thar."

The prisoner had guessed rightly.

Jasper, on seeing the money, had said to himself, mentally:

"What is to hinder my saving Lorne the trouble of killin' this chap, by doin' the bizness myself, now? The captain will not be put out—he will only thank me fur it, and I shall git hold of ev'ry cent of Henderson's money without any one bein' the wiser. I'll not use the revolver—that would make a noise and bring all the gang heer 'fore I could find the secret pocket where the money is kept."

As the idea crossed his mind, he walked round behind Skinflint, and drew his stiletto, intending to deal him the death-blow between the shoulders.

Before he could give the blow, however, Skinflint, suddenly turning around, brought his clinched fist against the side of Jasper's head with a peculiar 'back-hand' movement.

As the man was falling senseless, the prisoner caught him in his arms, and gently laid him on the floor.

"He's not quite sech a shadow as me, but our clothes 'll go on each other," thought the hunter.

Taking off his long blouse and wide-rimmed felt hat, he put them on the prostrate man as soon as he had removed the coat and hat of the outlaw. The latter's hat was of a light color, considerably wider in the rim than his own. He put it on his head, and also donned the gray coat. Then, having turned the fellow over on his side, and having pulled down the front of the hat, so as to conceal his face, he quietly left the cell, locking the door after him.

Some of the outlaws, who were awake, saw him, but as he imitated the swaggering gait of Jasper, their suspicions were not aroused.

Making his way through the passage to the trap-door, he raised it and came out into the hut.

"Halloa! Jasper, where are you bound to, at this time of the night?" inquired one of several men, who were in the hut.

"Thought I'd come out to take the air," answered Skinflint, imitating the voice of Jasper, "ther's not half enough in that cave."

"That's so. The captain ought to make improvements, though we had trouble enough to shape the cave, in the fust place."

"Yer'll all hev trouble enough, 'fore long, I dare say," answered Skinflint, as he quietly walked out of the hut.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MISTAKE.

"WHAT did Jasper mean by that?" said one of the men to the other.

"Don't know, and don't keer. He often speaks in riddles."

An hour later Lorne was seen to glide into the hut.

"I couldn't rest," he said, "thinking of that cursed Henderson! Death to the rascal, at once! No use of putting it off until to-morrow. I have just learned something, which convinces

me that he is a mere spy—a traitor, come here to find out our concerns, and to betray us."

"What is it, captain? What have you learned?"

"I had not left the cave half an hour, when I met with a party of hunters, who, it seems, to use their own words, are searching for 'those rascally outlaws,' who are causing so much trouble—robbing honest people, and making travel so unsafe. Of course I pretended to chime in with them, and, on inquiry, I learned that hundreds of people are now in search of the robbers."

"We must be keerful!" remarked one of the men to Lorne.

"Oh!" said the latter, "I'd risk their finding our quarters, here, unless we were betrayed, and now I come to the point. I hurried along to Logville as fast as I could go, and authorized Justice Bole to offer a reward, in my name, of \$500 for the arrest of the robbers!"

"Good!" cried one of the men.

"Then the justice told me that, on that very day, he had been visited by one of those miners we were going to rob, a few nights since. The man informed him that he had been warned, on that night, before the wagon could reach the turn of the road, that there was a gang lying in wait to rob him and his companions. Now, who do you think was the person who thus gave notice, and balked our little game? I will tell you. It was Henderson!"

"Henderson?" echoed his hearers.

"Yes. The miner described the person well—his dress, air and manner. He came out of the bush, hailed the wagon, and told all!"

"Then we have proof of his treason," said one of the listeners. "Death to the traitor!"

"Yes, death to him! death at once!" echoed the others, fiercely flourishing their knives.

Headed by Lorne, they entered the cave. The young outlaw unlocked the door of the small room in which their prisoner had been confined, and the party beheld, stretched out, with his back to the door, the occupant of the cell, whom they supposed was Henderson.

"He is asleep," said Lorne, "but that does not matter. Shoot the rascal at once!"

The report of several revolvers rung through the cave, waking such of the outlaws as were asleep.

They came thronging to the cell, to learn why the prisoner had been shot.

"Away with the body!" said Lorne. "Bury him outside of the hut!"

Several men advanced, and, turning the body over, his ghastly visage was revealed to all.

"Jasper!" cried Lorne, in dismay.

The others stared at the dead man in astonishment.

"Strange enough!" cried one.

"I don't know as there is anything so very strange about it, considering what a set of dolts you all are!" cried Lorne. "How you contrived to let Henderson outwit you in this manner, puzzles me."

"It was natural enough," said a man who had been one of those on guard in the hut. "We thought it was Jasper who came and passed us, for he was dressed in Jasper's coat and hat, with the rim of the hat pulled so far over his face that we could not see it."

"Well," said Lorne, "the mischief is done, and the sooner we bury our man and go to look for Henderson, the better! It will be strange enough if among us all we don't succeed in taking the life of that wretch!"

"Death to him—death to the traitor!" cried several, and the cry was caught up and echoed by the others.

Jasper was soon buried not far from the hut, several of the gang having first been to reconnoiter and make sure that no spy was there to watch their proceedings.

Meanwhile others of the band were looking for Skinflint.

The fear that he would betray them to the authorities induced them to make great exertions to find him.

Finally, four of them who had reached the summit of a cliff, descried in the distance a figure, which they at once inferred was that of the fugitive.

Taking a roundabout course to head him off, they posted themselves behind a clump of shrubbery which he was approaching.

Skinflint, unconscious of their presence, strode on toward the lurking-place of his foes.

The latter resolved to kill him with their knives, as the noise of their pistols, if fired, might attract the attention of some one of the gangs who were searching for robbers, and who might be in the vicinity of the place.

As the hunter was about to pass the shrubbery

the men sprung toward him, thinking they would be able to bury their knives in his body ere he would have a chance to defend himself.

"Hillo!" cried Skinflint, nimbly springing back and dropping into a hollow near the path. "Come on, ef yer want me to plug yer!"

As he spoke he drew his revolver, and was about to pull trigger, when one of the gang, who had darted round to the other side of the hollow, sprung into the latter, and, knocking aside his arm with his left hand, endeavored to plunge his knife in his back between his shoulders.

The hunter, however, was too quick for the rascal.

Whirling round, he avoided the blow, and, apparently averse to taking life when it could be avoided, dealt him on the head, with his revolver, a blow which knocked him senseless.

The three others of the gang were now in the hollow, but ere they could use their knives Skinflint nimbly swung himself out of the pit by means of the branch of a tree which he had seized.

"Now, then, you raskils!" he cried, pointing his revolver down toward them, "I hev yer trapped! Don't yer try fur to come out of that yere hole, or, shore as yer's born, I'll plug yer!"

The three outlaws looked at each other in dismay. Skinflint was decidedly the master of the situation. There he stood, sheltered by the tree, and, ere they could draw their pistols or get out of the hollow, he could send a bullet through each of them.

"What are yer goin' to do with us?" inquired one.

"Well, I'm not perticklar, but I think hangin' would be a little too good for sech villains! I see some folks comin' this way now, and I hope they may prove to be people who are huntin' fur the robbers which hev done so much mischief!"

"For God's sake! let us go, Henderson!" cried one of the men, "and we swear to you that we will not try to molest you again."

"I don't think I kin trust yer," said Skinflint. "However," he added, for a keen glance at the approaching party had made him suspect that they belonged to the band of his enemies, "I mout let yer go, ef yer'll promise to do all yer kin to hinder t'others from findin' me."

"We will! we will!" was the eager answer.

"Go then," said Skinflint, "but don't forgit yer promise!"

The outlaws, scrambling out of the hollow, had proceeded some yards ere their comrades were heard calling to them.

"What fools we've been!" cried one. "We might have had that cursed Henderson out of the way by this time, had we only waited, for, see, our men have now reached the hollow, and yonder goes our 'game,' streaking it in the other direction!"

In fact Skinflint had left many yards behind him and his foes, but, unfortunately, his course now led him toward an impassable marsh.

The gang darted in pursuit of him. He reached the marsh, and could go no further.

"Hyar's a diffikilty I didn't expect," he muttered—"not bein' very well acquaint with this part of the country. Well, I must make the best on it!"

He coolly faced round, and aimed his revolver at the approaching party, now not more than a hundred paces off, numbering a dozen men.

They came to a halt behind a slight mound of earth, which would hinder Skinflint's shots from taking effect, and pointed their pistols toward him.

"No use, Henderson, you're a dead dog!" cried one of them.

As they fired, Skinflint dropped upon the ground, and the bullets passed over his head.

Ere they could fire again, there was a yell, and a large party of Omahas were seen approaching, on their right.

Firing a few parting shots, the gang took to their heels, and a minute later Skinflint, unharmed, was among the Indian braves.

"Good! Come just in time," said Wono, the chief. "We look for Tamina, but no can find. We have seen you with Lona. We know you to be a friend of the young white hunter."

"Thar yer's right. I am his friend."

"We have seen you with Lorne, Belton's enemy, too. You are not his friend?"

"No, Injun, but I don't mind tellin' yer that I've pertended to be, fur a sart'in purpose."

"It is well. Come to the Omahas' camp. The bad men who would take my white brother's life cannot reach him there."

"I'll go to yer camp fur to-night," answered Skinflint.

He accompanied the Indians to their camp, which was not far off.

"Now, then," he muttered to himself, "thar's no use of going to the justice of Logville to tell him about Lorne's true character. He wouldn't b'lieve me, or would putend that he did not. Fur the sake of that boy, however, that Belton, I must wring from him a confession that he was the raskil who killed Mr. Danton's darter, fur ther's hardly a doubt in my mind that *he did it*, though I hev'n't yet been able to git him to tell me so. He ought to be made to own that 'fore I go to an honest magistrate who'll see justice done."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CAPTURE.

ON the next morning Skinflint left the Omaha camp to pay a visit to Belton before going on to lie in wait for Lorne.

He found the youth still in the cave, but he said nothing to him about the young captain of the robbers.

To the questions of his friend he simply answered that things were working right, and that he hoped soon to obtain proof of Belton's innocence.

Fireheels now described his meeting with the boy, Forner, and related what he had said about the murder.

"Thar's the chap I must find, then," said Skinflint. "Yes, I must move heaven and yearth to find him. Yer've no idea whar he is now?"

"No, but I doubt not Lona has found him before this time."

"I must see Lona first, then."

An hour later Skinflint left the cave and went in search of the Indian girl.

She was not at the Omaha camp, so the hunter went elsewhere to look for her. He was, however, unable to see her, although for several days, he searched far and near.

At last he concluded he would go back to the Omaha camp, hoping she had returned to it during his absence.

The twilight hour was near when he found himself not far from the rock under which was the outlaws' cave.

Thinking he heard voices behind a clump of shrubbery near him, he cautiously approached, drawing his revolver, and crouched behind a bush.

Through openings among the twigs, he now saw Lorne and one of his gang, who were seated on a log conversing in a low voice.

"I don't hardly think it would be safe to kill that Indian girl," Lorne was saying, "until we are ready to leave these parts, which'll be before long. That Henderson *may* betray us at any moment. The girl is safe enough where we have her—in the dungeon—and there is no danger of her being found, as I've rolled a boulder over the crevice on top of the rock which leads down into the cave. As I said, we'll soon have to leave this country, which is getting too hot for us, as there are people now, far and near, looking for the robbers who have done so much mischief. When we are ready to go, it will be time enough for us to end the life of that troublesome girl."

Skinflint distinctly heard these words.

"I'll soon hev that gal out of yer clutches," he thought; "and I reckon yer'll not git away from heer quite so easily as yer seem to think!"

Cautiously moving round to the other side of the rock, he ascended it.

Then he pulled a coil of slender rope from the wallet he carried, and having rolled the boulder away from the opening, over which it had been placed, he fastened one end of the rope to a rugged projection, allowing the other end to hang down into the dungeon.

Rapidly descending, he was soon in the gloomy cavern, at one side of which Lona was now fastened by a chain to the wall.

At first he could not see her, but a moment later, he heard her voice.

"Who is there?"

"It's me," answered Skinflint, "and I've come to git yer out of this hole."

"That is good. Lona will be glad to go away from here, for she much likes the sun and the fresh air."

"Of course yer does."

He advanced to her side, but he could not unfasten the chain by which she was held.

At length, however, he succeeded in knocking from the wall the staple to which one end of it was secured.

Then he tied the chain around her waist, so that it would make no noise during her ascent from the dungeon.

"Now, then, yer kin climb the rope, but whar's the other gal—the white gal, who was heer? I don't see her."

"They took her to another part of the cave; they say she die if she kept here."

"The mean varmints! Well, go on, Lona."

The Indian girl commenced to climb the rope, which she found it easy to do, as there were projections on the side of the rocky wall, all the way up to the opening.

Skinflint followed her, and when he had reached the summit of the rock, he returned his rope to his wallet, and rolled the boulder back in its place.

As the two hurried along in the direction of the Omaha camp, the hunter spoke about the boy, Forner.

"Did yer find that young chap? Belton told me yer went to look fur him."

"Yes, find him. We take to justice, but justice would not believe. Boy get away. Afterward, he try kill himself by drowning, but Lona save him, and lead him to Omaha camp."

"And is he thar, now?"

"He was there when Lona left the camp, few days ago. Hope he is there yet."

They soon reached the camp, but Forner no longer was there. On the day before, he had contrived to slip away, and the Indians did not know in what direction he had gone.

"Too bad!" said Skinflint. "I wanted to hev a talk with that boy about the murder."

There was a peculiar expression on Lona's face when Skinflint made this remark, but she said nothing.

Next morning the hunter left the camp. He hovered on the outskirts of Logville, evidently watching for some person.

Lorne finally passed that way.

Skinflint followed him until he reached a lonely spot, near a thicket, when he sprung forward and collared him.

"No noise, or yer'll git this!" cried the hunter, savagely, as he leveled his revolver at the head of the young outlaw.

"What are you going to do? What do you want?" inquired Lorne, coolly.

"Confess that *you* murdered her—you mean varmint!"

"Murdered who? What are you talking about? Have you lost your senses?"

"I mean that *you* are the coon that killed Mr. Danton's darter! Come, own up at once!"

"You know better," was the quiet answer. "You know I had no hand in that affair. You know it was your friend Belton who did the deed!"

"No! no! yer don't git off with any of yer lies!"

"You better let me go."

"No, I'm not goin' to let yer go, arter what I've larned. Yer'll jist go with me 'fore a magistrate, and I'll hev yer locked up fur trial. I know enough about yer, now!"

"You cannot harm me. Bole would not believe you."

"I'm not goin' to Bole, I'm goin' to Justice Wentworth, who is a friend of mine, and who'll b'lieve what I say."

Lorne turned pale but quickly recovered himself.

At that moment the noise of approaching footsteps was heard, not far off.

"Here come some of the men who are hunting for the robbers," said Lorne. "If you don't let me go, it'll be the worse you."

"I hev a few questions to ask yer," said Skinflint, fiercely.

"Questions?"

"Yes, *what hev yer done with Mary?*"

At these words, Lorne looked confused.

"Mary?" he stammered.

"Yes; the poor gal that yer married, and then deserted, after cursin' her and beatin' her, leavin' her in a snow-drift to freeze to death!"

"I don't know as this is any of your business," said Lorne, striving to speak calmly.

"It is my business, and I'll tell yer why. That sweet little gal was my sister!"

"You, her brother?" cried Lorne, startled.

"Yes, and I swore to hunt yer down, and avenge the gal!"

"You are not going to kill me?" said the outlaw, alarmed at the fierce aspect of the man before him.

"No, I'm not goin' to kill yer. I'm goin' to let the law deal with you, as you deserve. It's fur this I've shadowed yer so long!"

"Well, then, it is true I left my wife, but I hope she was not frozen to death."

"She was not. It was that noble boy, Belton, who helped her, and may God bless him fur it. But what I want to find out from you is whar she is, *now*! She left my house, and I

tracked her as far as heer, after which I lost all trace of her. You must know what has become of her!"

"Upon my word, I do not," gasped Lorne. "Come with me, yer varmint—come!" said Skinflint, dragging him along with him. "You shall go with me to Justice Wentworth!"

Lorne now made a desperate effort to free himself, but in vain. Skinflint's grasp upon his collar was like iron.

"I told yer I did not mean to kill yer," he said, "but, by the 'tarnall ef yer try to git away from me, I'll do it, in spite of consequences!"

Lorne knew that Skinflint would keep his word, and he offered no further resistance, resolving, however, to watch for a chance to escape.

But mile after mile was traversed, and still no such chance presented itself.

Skinflint's whitish eyes were continually upon his prisoner, who had no opportunity to draw one of the pistols he had with him. He knew that the moment he should do so, his desperate captor would shoot him dead on the spot!

"Yes," said the hunter, as they moved on. "My little sister war an angel—she war a good gal, and she war happy until you saw her—you cussed viper! Ef I had been at home when you came to my house, yer'd never hev contrived to git her to marry you. It war all done while I war on a huntin' and trappin' tramp, but I ueerd, when I came back, how yer beat and cussed her—then how you set out with her as you said, to go to another settlement, hundreds of miles away, and left her in the wilderness to die. She war never the same, arter that. I think it onsettled her reason a little, and when I saw her ag'in I couldn't git a smile out o' the gal, who always, 'fore that, had been so glad to see me. She kep' pinin'-like, until one day, a few weeks ago, I found her gone. I'll larn what's become of her, ef I hev to wring yer neck fur it!"

To this Lorne made no reply, but his face became ghastly, and he trembled from head to foot.

Suddenly the sound of an approaching party was heard, and the eyes of the young outlaw lighted up, for he hoped he would now find a chance to escape.

His disappointment was great when the chief Wono and some of his men came to view.

"Ugh! good!" said the chief. "The hunter has his foe."

"Yes, and I'm goin' to take him to Justice Wentworth, who lives 'bout thirty mile from heer."

"It is a long way. There are some of the tribe of the Snakes about, and they are the enemies of the Omahas. Tamina has joined them, and so, if the hunter should fall in with them, they would take his prisoner from him."

"Ef they do, they'll not take him alive!" cried Skinflint.

"They will make the hunter prisoner, too, and, if Tamina sees him, he will tell them to take his scalp. Wono will send some of his warriors with the hunter."

"Good!" said Skinflint, "that'll make things safer."

Six of the Omaha braves were detached to go with Skinflint, and Lorne now saw less chance than ever for an escape.

CHAPTER XV.

ALIVE, OR DEAD?

CROUCHING in the shrubbery, one of Lorne's gang had seen his captain led off a prisoner by Skinflint.

The man, whose name was John Jasper, was a cousin of the person who had been killed through mistake by the outlaws, as already described, in the cave.

This person, having with him a revolver, could easily have shot down the hunter and have thus freed his chief.

But, on reflection, he concluded not to do so, for a reason which will soon be shown.

Quietly seated on the ground, he watched through an opening in the bushes the two forms until they were out of sight. Then he rose, saying to himself:

"All the better that he should be taken out of the way. This will leave the coast clear for me."

He rubbed his hands and seemed much pleased.

Then, after a few minutes' reflection, he went straight to the house of Mr. Danton and asked to see that person.

He was admitted to his presence, and he stood surveying him for several moments, apparently with some satisfaction.

The lines which had appeared on the face of the salmon merchant and the many white threads that were now blended with his raven hair, were not there before his daughter met with her terrible fate. She was his only child, and deeply-seated melancholy, which would probably never desert him, had succeeded to the grief and horror which he had experienced when the tragedy first became known to him.

"I've come to see yer 'bout somethin' important," said John Jasper.

"You want work in my factory, I suppose?" said Danton, glancing at the man's rough teamster's garb. "I think I have seen you before. You were a jurymen in that—that—awful—"

"Not so awful as yer seem to think, sir," interrupted Jasper.

"What do you mean?"

"It is not for work, but it is 'bout that affair I've come to see yer, sir," was the reply.

"Go on, for heaven's sake!"

"Well, then, I'll begin by askin' yer what yer'd give me if I could bring back yer darter to yer?"

"Bring her back?" cried Mr. Danton, with a wild stare. "Are you crazy?"

"Not a bit of it, sir."

"Do you mean to tell me that she lives?"

"I didn't say so, sir!"

"Wretch! get out of this house! You either have come here to torture me, or you have lost your senses, and don't know what you are saying!"

"Come now, sir, keep cool. I didn't say yer darter is alive, but, supposin' she is—what would yer give for havin' her restored to you?"

Mr. Danton looked steadily at the speaker. There was, in the expression of the man's face, nothing indicative of insanity.

"Unfortunately," said the merchant, "my daughter does not live, and, therefore, I see no use of this senseless talk. Good God! did I not see her body myself? Did I not—"

"How do you know it was her body?" quietly interrupted Jasper.

"How did I know it?" gasped Mr. Danton. "Why, by her face—her dress—by her size."

"You cannot say by her face!"

"What do you mean?" cried the merchant, shuddering. "Rascal!" he continued. "Leave me! Go! You have come here to torture me—to gratify your own curiosity!"

"Well, then, I'll come to the p'int. Yer darter is alive!"

"Alive? my daughter?" cried Mr. Danton in a wild voice.

"Yes, your darter. Now, what will yer give me fur restorin' her to you?"

"Where is she? Come, tell me, where is my child? But no; you are imposing on me!"

"As true as that's a sky above us," answered Jasper solemnly, "yer darter is alive! I have seen her. The body found was not hers! It was that of another person, who looked like her and was dressed like her."

"Impossible!"

"It is so. Yer darter, I've l'arned, is kept a pris'ner. I know where she is."

Mr. Danton sprung forward and collared the speaker.

"You know where she is?—you are keeping her a prisoner? This is unlawful, and you must be dealt with as you deserve. I will have you arrested."

"Please let go of me, sir. I had no hand in yer darter's being made a pris'ner. It is the Indians who are responsible."

"Indians?"

"Yes, a wandering tribe. Your darter is in their hands. I alone can git her by bargainin' with the chief, who is under obligations to me."

"Take me, then, to the chief, and I will pay the ransom."

"That wouldn't do. They'll deal only with me. They would scalp you, and marry yer darter to one of the tribe, and clear out where yer'd never see 'em ag'in! Come, I'll tell yer what I'll do," continued Jasper, as Mr. Danton now let go of his collar. "Give me ten thousand dollars, and yer'll see yer darter 'fore yer's two days older."

"You're an impostor!" cried Mr. Danton—"You—"

"The money to be paid only when your darter is before you!" interrupted Jasper.

"Oh! can this be true?" cried the merchant.

"It's the livin' truth, sir. Does it look like imposition, my tellin' yer that I expect no money until I free your darter and bring her before you? Facts is," added Jasper, in a whining, hypocritical voice, "I'd do this fur nothin' exceptin' the ransom asked by the chief, but fur

my bein' a poor man, with a famerly to keef for, and—"

"Enough!" interrupted Mr. Danton. "I agree to your terms. You shall have the money the moment you restore to me my child."

And as he spoke his eyes gleamed with wild joy.

"Ther' must be no trick'ry in this bizness," said Jasper—"no spies sent to track me or to arrest me. Ef ther's anythin' of that kind done, I'll know it, and then I'll have nothing more to do with the affair."

"No, no, I promise you that there'll be nothin' of the kind. Tell me how soon you can bring her to me! For God's sake! speak quickly, and make the time short!"

"To-morrow morning I will come here to take you to yer darter—that is provided yer show me the cash which you are to give me. But you must keep silent about it. You must not tell a livin' soul until after our bizness is done, or the whole thing falls through."

"Be it so! be it so!" cried Mr. Danton, eagerly, ready, under the circumstances, to promise 'most anything. "You will not disappoint me!" he added, in so beseeching a tone that even the hard heart of the villain was touched. "You are not deceiving me?"

"As true as I'm a livin' man I'm not," answered Jasper, in a voice which carried conviction with it.

"You will come to-morrow morning?"

"I will come—at eight o'clock."

As may be imagined, the merchant obtained no sleep that night. Never before had time seemed to him so long. He had great command over himself, however, and contrived to appear calm and self possessed.

The hour agreed upon came at last, and with it Jasper, true to his promise.

"Come, let us lose no time!" said Mr. Danton. "You have my daughter at the place to which you intend to take me?"

"Yes, she is there, but first, please let me see the money?"

Mr. Danton took out his pocketbook and exhibited twenty \$500 bills, which made the eyes of the young villain glisten.

"All right," he said, "I am ready."

They left the house.

They had not proceeded far when a terrible thought—one which had not occurred to him before—crossed the merchant's mind.

Might not this be a trick to rob him of the money in his possession? Might not the person with him be an outlaw—one of that gang which was now being hunted for all over the country?

The more he thought of it, the stronger became his conviction that such was the case.

However, he would be on his guard. He carried a small pistol in his pocket, and upon this he kept his hand as the two walked on.

The path taken by Jasper led toward the wildest and most unfrequented parts of the country.

"How much further will we have to go?" inquired Mr. Danton, when they had walked several miles, and were out of sight of the settlement.

"Not much further," answered the other.

"Where will I find my child?"

"Seated on a rock in a small cave, where I've left her for security."

Some minutes later he pointed to a rock ahead of them.

"The cave is in that rock," he said.

They soon reached the place.

Jasper pulled aside a boulder there.

"Here she is!" he cried.

He peered into the hollow; then he drew back with a cry of surprise and disappointment.

"She is not there now!" he said.

"Rascal!" exclaimed Mr. Danton. "You have tricked me, and I know why!"

"Upon my word, I have not. I left her in that cave to wait for you!"

"Was there any one with her?"

"Not a soul!"

"Then she could not have got away. She could not have moved that boulder!"

"That's so, she could not have moved it, but she is gone for all that, as you can see for yerself!"

Mr. Danton looked into the cave, to discover that it was empty. He saw something on the ground there, and picked it up. It was a small coral breast pin, which he at once recognized as having belonged to his daughter!

"My God! you were right!" he cried. "She has really been here, for here is her breast-pin, which must have dropped! What can have become of her?"

"An Indian has had something to do with it," said Jasper, pointing to the print of a moc-

casin, on the soft ground, near the cave. The track was lost among the rocks, further beyond.

"We will look for her! We will find her!" cried Mr. Danton. "Come, help me—come! she may not have gone far!"

The merchant, now off his guard, suddenly felt the hand of Jasper grasping him like a vise by the back of the neck, while he raised a long knife he had drawn, to stab him between the shoulders!

The aim was sure and deadly, but, as the knife was descending, the arm of the villain was seized in an iron grasp, and the blow from the butt of a pistol laid him senseless on the ground.

Danton turned to discover that his deliverer was Frank Belton!

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE WAY.

SKINFLINT and the Indians kept on with Lorne toward the settlement where Justice Wentworth was to be found.

The country traversed was wild and lonely, abounding with rugged peaks, deep wooded glens, and dark thickets.

All at once the Omaha braves paused.

"Hello! What's up?" inquired Skinflint.

"Snakes come," said one of the Indians.

"Whar?"

The Omaha pointed toward a distant thicket.

Skinflint could see the shrubbery there gently moved, and, to a less practiced eye, it might have been thought that this was caused only by the wind.

The Omahas at once prepared for battle, those who had rifles cocking them, and such of them as were provided only with spears, holding their weapons ready for service.

They had not long to wait. With a wild yell, a dozen Snakes, headed by Tamina, suddenly broke from the shrubbery, and rushed to meet their enemies, discharging rifles as they came. A couple of the Omahas fell, shot through their hearts, so that there were now but four left.

Meanwhile Skinflint's piece, aimed with unerring precision, brought down two of his foes, but, ere he could reload, the savage band came rushing up with spears and tomahawks, and a hand-to-hand combat ensued.

This was of brief duration. Another of the Omahas having been killed, the rest took to their heels. Skinflint finding himself surrounded, endeavored to use his knife and revolver, but Lorne caught one of his arms, and strove to hold it, while Tamina, with a blow of his rifle, knocked the pistol from his grasp.

An Indian had been about to strike Lorne previous to this, with his tomahawk, but Tamina had said: "No, white prisoner is our friend. He must not be hurt!" and the savage had immediately lowered his weapon.

Several tomahawks were flourished about the head of Skinflint, when Tamina again interposed.

"Scalp now too good for white hunter. The torture for him!"

A yell of fierce delight was given by the warriors, as they crowded about the hunter, fastening his arms securely behind his back with thongs.

These savage fellows, naked to the waist, with their hideously-painted faces and their head-dresses of black and red feathers, some of which drooped over their fiery eyes, were soon capering about their prisoner, performing a wild, triumphant dance, while their yells and hoarse, guttural cries rung upon the air.

"Yer may as well stop yer dancin'," remarked Skinflint, "as it has no effect on me. I don't keer shucks for any one on yer!"

"Why help Omaha?" inquired one of the Indians. "If not help Omaha, would not torture."

"I'd help 'em again, ef I had the chance," was the reply.

"Good! then like torture. Make dance and scream when fire burn. The pale-faces cannot stand fire."

"We'll see 'bout that," answered Skinflint, coolly.

Lorne now stepped in front of his late captor. "The tables are turned," he said triumphantly. "How do you like it?" he added, tauntingly.

Skinflint showed his teeth, and his eyes literally blazed, but he said not a word.

"I wish you would permit me to shoot down this fellow as he stands," continued Lorne, turning to Tamina. "He will make much mischief, if he should escape."

"The hunter will not escape," replied Tam-

ina. "If my white brother wishes, he can go with us, and see us burn the prisoner to death!"

"I will go with you to see that," replied Lorne, "even though I lose much precious time by it."

Six of the savages started off in pursuit of the Omahas; the rest, with Tamina and Lorne, went on toward their camp.

This was situated on the other side of the thicket.

A fire was about to be made for the torture, when a furious storm of wind and rain came on and prevented it.

Skinflint, bound hand and foot, was then placed in one of the skin tents.

The storm raged all day.

When night came, a guard of two Indian youths was stationed near the prisoner's tent.

One of the boys seated himself under a tree, near the edge of a thicket, where he was partly sheltered from the rain. The night was so dark that, even had any of the other warriors emerged from their tents, they could not have seen him.

All at once the youth received upon his head a blow which laid him senseless on the ground. An Indian girl glided from behind the tree whence she had dealt the blow with a heavy stick. This girl was Lona, who now proceeded to put upon her head the mass of drooping feathers worn by the boy and also the tattered blanket in which he had wrapped his form. Then, seating herself for a moment under the tree, she rose and walked leisurely toward the tent armed with the spear which the boy had carried.

The youth who had not left his post glanced at her, and muttered something which she could not hear, but it was evident that his suspicions were not aroused.

Finally Lona started to creep into the tent.

"What are you doing there? Why are you going there?" inquired the youth, in his native tongue.

"To see if our prisoner is all right," answered Lona.

"You take too much trouble. Of course he is well enough."

Lona, however, kept on.

"Hello!" whispered Skinflint, "what are yer up to now, Injun?"

"Hist! it is Lona. She come to rescue her friend."

"God bless yer, gal, yer's an angel!" said the hunter, as, with her knife, she quickly severed his thongs.

She put a pistol in his hand.

"Come!" she added, "you must make a rush! It is even now uncertain if we succeed in escaping!"

"Give me the range of the woods, and I'll risk it!" was the answer.

Followed by Lona, he dashed out of the tent.

The youthful guard, shouting an alarm, sprung to thrust his spear into him, but Skinflint adroitly avoiding the weapon, knocked him senseless with the butt of his revolver.

A moment later, as he darted into the woods, he heard the yells of the savages, who had been aroused, and were now in pursuit.

He looked for Lona, but he could see nothing of the girl in the gloom. Ahead of him he beheld the dark forms of the camp-guard, who stood near the other side of the thicket.

He could see the gleam of their fiery eyes like those of wild beasts, as they leaned forward, and, fearing that they might get a glimpse of his form, he glided off in another direction.

Meanwhile the boy whom Lona had struck senseless, had come to and joined in the pursuit. As he crept swiftly along the ground like a serpent, he saw the indistinct form of Lona crouched behind a tree, a few paces ahead of him.

In a moment he was upon her, holding her fast in spite of her struggles, until Tamina came up with several of the warriors.

The latter were about to bury their tomahawks in her head, when the young Indian interposed.

"No!" he cried. "Tamina want the girl. He will make her his squaw, and his slave!"

"Lona rather be killed!" said the maiden.

"It shall not be. Tamina has her, at last. She shall hereafter stay with the Snakes. The Omahas shall know her no more!"

"Lona will never forget her people, nor will her people forget her!" answered the girl, proudly. "Tamina is half a Snake. His mother was a Snake, but Lona is of the noble tribe of the Omahas!"

"It does not matter. At last Tamina has her in his clutches, and he will make her love and respect him!"

"That can never be done, for her heart is away from Tamina. It was never with him."

"It was with him until Fireheels crossed her path!" cried Tamina, enraged. "That pale-face will yet be in our hands. The Snakes are on his track."

A shudder passed through the girl's frame. She feared that Belton would be captured by the Snakes, who she knew were wonderfully skillful on the trail. It at once occurred to her that it was best to soothe Tamina, so that, if the white hunter should be made prisoner by the Snakes, he might not be tortured.

"Tamina's talk comes too fast," she said. "What does he mean? Lona likes Fireheels as a friend—that is all!"

"It is not so. Tamina has keen eyes. Lona cannot deceive him."

The girl was then taken to the camp, and her ankles having been bound, she was placed in one of the tents.

Next morning the savages who had hunted for Skinflint came back to the camp. They had been unable to find this man, who had contrived to escape them by dodging about, in the dark thicket.

CHAPTER XVII.

STRATEGY.

MR. DANTON, saved as previously described, by Frank Belton, who had struck John Jasper down at the moment when he was about to plunge his knife into the back of his intended victim, was at first, on recognizing his rescuer, too much agitated to speak.

"You, it is then you," he cried, at last.

"Yes, sir, and it was lucky I came this way."

"I would rather owe my life to any person than to you!" said Danton.

"I know why, but you're mistaken. God knows I had no hand in killing your daughter!"

"It is too late for you to deny it now. Surrender yourself! You are my prisoner. I am not yet too old to arrest my daughter's murderer."

And as he spoke, Mr. Danton pointed his pistol at Frank's head.

The youth, leaning on his rifle, looked at him, calmly.

"Surrender, I say, or I'll shoot!"

"I will not surrender," answered Belton, "because I am innocent. I hope before long that this may be proved."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That's a youth, now at large, who saw the person who did the deed. At present he cannot be found, but I hope he soon will be, and will be made to tell who the assassin was."

"Rascal, you speak of your accomplice, or friend, Forner. I heard all about him from Lorne. You hired him to say what he did."

"That you mistake. I had never seen him before I met him, one night—"

"Never mind particulars. The question now is, will you or will you not surrender? The law will justify me in shooting you down, for there has been a reward offered for you, dead or alive."

At that moment something came whizzing through the air.

It was a spear, which, striking the pistol held by Mr. Danton, knocked it from his grasp, and passed through the body of John Jasper, who still lay senseless, pinning him to the ground.

A yell was heard at the same moment, and half a dozen fierce Indians of the Snake tribe were seen rushing toward the young hunter from a thicket not twenty paces off.

"Run and save yourself," said Belton to Mr. Danton. "The Snakes are on the war-path and will scalp you if you remain."

The merchant had heard that this tribe had lately attacked and killed some white men in another part of the territory.

"You will come with me," he said.

"No, sir; I'll stay hyar to keep the varmints at bay as long as possible."

Danton hurried off. He had seen in the distance a party of hunters, whom he hoped to notify and bring up to the assistance of Belton, for he was determined to have the youth arrested if possible.

Meanwhile, as he ran on, he reflected on the trick of which he believed he had been made the victim by John Jasper.

But how came the breastpin in the cave?

"I am sure it is the one which belonged to my daughter," he muttered. "That rascal Jasper must have stolen it from the body after death, and put it there on purpose, in order to carry out the deception, and not excite my suspicions, so that he might have a chance to kill me and possess himself of the \$10,000. Well, he has met with his deserts, at any rate, and now,

if I can only get Belton in the hands of the authorities, it will at least be some satisfaction."

Belton by this time had fired two shots from his rifle at the approaching savages, and each bullet had wounded an Indian.

The hunters, in the distance, heard the sound of the weapon, and seeing what was going on, they came to meet Mr. Danton.

But they were too far off to render Fireheels any assistance. Ere he could reload, the savages had surrounded and captured him.

After securely binding their captive's hands they hurried off with him, making good speed in order to escape the hunters, who, although still far off, were fast coming on.

Night closed about them ere they halted. The violent storm previously alluded to now was raging, but a careful watch over the prisoner was kept.

In the morning they continued on their way, and soon reached their camp, to hear of the events concerning the escape of Skinflint, the capture of Lona, etc., which have already been described.

On seeing Belton, Lorne uttered a cry of triumph.

"A greater prize could not have dropped into my hands," he said.

"What does my white brother mean?" inquired an old chief.

"I mean that this person has perpetrated a horrible murder. Has not my red brother heard of the murder of Bell Danton—the white girl at Logville?"

"Think hear of it; but why speak of prisoner as prize to my white brother?"

"You should know that that girl was a friend of mine, and that I want to avenge her death. It was a terrible deed."

"You think Fireheels did it?"

"Yes, I am certain of it."

"Ugh! my white brother make mistake. Fireheels would not kill a white squaw—he would not even kill an Indian squaw. His heart is too big and too brave. The Snakes know him to be their enemy, but they can see his heart, and they are not blind."

"There is every reason to believe he was the assassin," said Lorne, impatiently, "and a brutal one at that." Turning to the old Indian Belton said:

"The Snake tells the truth when he says I did not kill the girl. I would have protected her with my life."

"Chief," cried Lorne, "you must give this man up to the white people. They are hunting for him. They want to hang him for the murder, as he deserves. A reward has been offered for him, and you will get it if you give him to the pale-faces."

"It is well. Samodi will have a talk with his warriors. If they agree to what my white brother asks, it shall be done."

A council was at once held. In this council Tamina had great influence. He advised the giving up of the prisoner, and the Snakes finally resolved to surrender him to the whites, instead of putting him to the torture, as they had intended to do.

Scarcely had they come to this conclusion when the crack of rifles was heard, and an Indian brave came rushing into the camp, saying that the Snake scouts had been attacked by a party of pale-face hunters, who were coming on toward the camp.

"There must be no fighting to-day," said Lorne. "I will go forward, see those hunters, and propose to them not to attack you; but to arrange to pay you the reward and receive Fireheels."

"Good," answered Samodi. "My brother speaks well."

Accompanied by one of the Indians, Lorne walked off and soon met the white hunters, to whom he explained the proposed arrangement.

Now it chanced that these hunters were one of the parties searching for the outlaws who had lately done so much mischief. They were the same men whom Mr. Danton had met on the day before, after his flight from the savages, and he had advised them to get possession, at all hazards, of Belton, dead or alive.

Great, therefore, was their satisfaction when they saw Lorne, and learned from him that there would be no difficulty in obtaining the prize, for which, in addition to the reward already offered, Mr. Danton had declared he would pay five hundred dollars more.

A few muskets and some powder would satisfy the savages. The hunters would manage to retain the bulk of the reward.

Among the party there was a person who had joined them that morning, on their way to the camp. He was a tall, sinewy man, as lean as

a shadow, wearing leggings, a blanket, and an old felt hat with an enormous brim, which had nearly concealed his face.

When he saw Lorne coming, he had withdrawn from the band, saying he was going to get a drink of water from a spring, not far off.

At length, after Lorne set out on his return to the camp to prepare the Snakes for the approach of the hunters, he rejoined the latter.

"Them Injuns is treach'rous," he remarked, "and I tharfore think our best plan would be fur only one on us to go to the camp, and return hyar with the pris'ner. Ef they mean to massacre us, only one will then be killed, which are better than fur all to fall into the trap."

"But who'll hev the pluck to go all alone in that way?"

"I'll go, ef yer like," answered the stranger. "The risk is worth runnin', fur they may not mean to trap us, arter all."

This proposal was agreed to. The stranger went into the thicket, and he was soon in sight of the camp.

Instead of going on, he crouched behind a tree and listened.

Finally, hearing footsteps, he saw Lorne and Tamina pass on their way back to the hunters to tell them that the Snakes were ready to surrender Belton to them if they would agree to give them in return fifty rifles and as many pounds of powder.

The concealed watcher waited until Lorne and the young Indian were out of sight. Then he moved rapidly forward and boldly stalked into the camp.

The first person he met was the old chief, Samodi.

"I come from the white hunters," he said, "for Fireheels! I am to take him to them. They sent me for him."

"Our white brother has gone to tell the hunters what we will charge for the prisoner and to bring them or their answer."

"I am the chief of that hunter party," was the response. "Tell me yer terms, and we'll see ef we kin not close the barg'in, so as to save time."

"Fifty rifles—fifty pounds good powder. Rifles must be good, too."

"Lord! Injun, yer goes it pooty steep. Ef yer'd only lower yer terms a bit."

"I have said it. Will take no less."

"Well, then, I reckon I'll hev to close with yer. Give me the pris'ner, and yer better send an Injun 'long with him, too! That white chap yer hev hyar—that Lorne, will sarve fur a hostage, fur the safe deliv'ry of yer goods, soon as we git the reward, which, yer see, will hev to be paid to us, fore we kin pay it to you."

"It is well."

Samodi then said something to his men, who soon approached with the captive.

Belton looked closely at the person who had come to conduct him from the camp, and recognized Skinflint.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRANGE DISCLOSURES.

THE moment he made this discovery, the young hunter comprehended his friend intended to effect his rescue. Neither by look nor manner, however, did he show that he knew his conductor.

An Indian, named Gonok, was summoned to go with the twain. As he was a large, powerful fellow, armed with knife, tomahawk and rifle, Skinflint perceived that he would have to make use of all his strength and agility to overcome such an opponent.

When the three were out of sight of the camp, he snatched from the hands of the savage the rifle carried by the latter, and which was the one he had taken from Belton, at the time the youth was captured. Ere the Indian could draw his tomahawk, Skinflint made a blow at his head with the butt of the piece, but the wily Snake, adroitly dodging it, was about to give the alarm and use his knife, when his antagonist squeezing his throat with one hand, dealt him a tremendous stroke between the eyes with his huge, clinched fist, which laid Gonok senseless at his feet.

"Thar yer are!" said Skinflint, as, with his knife, he severed Belton's bonds. "Now, off yer go and make tracks that way,"—pointing as he spoke, in a direction where the fugitive would not meet with the party of hunters.

As he spoke, he put into the hands of his young friend the rifle he had taken from the Snake.

"You are not going with me?" said Belton.

"No, I hev to go another way," was the reply.

"But I hope to meet yer, fore long. Come, streak it, pard, like white lightnin', fur the secret cave. Yer've no time to lose!"

The youth darted off, and was soon lost to view in the shadows of the forest.

"Now, then, fur that poor Injun gal!" muttered Skinflint, as he made his way rapidly toward a mountain which loomed in the distance.

In a valley at the base of this mountain, the Omaha warriors had all collected to prepare for an assault upon the Snakes, the news of the late conflict having been brought to them on the night before, by some of the fugitive braves.

Wono had his men ready for the march, when Skinflint made his appearance.

"Thought the hunter prisoner," said the chief. "How come here?"

"I was saved by that noble gal of yours—Lona," he answered.

Having described his rescue, he went on.

"Arter gittin' off, I skulked about in the woods, and contrived to keep cl'ar of the Injuns. Finally, I came upon a dead Omaha. I tuk off his leggings and blanket, and put 'em on. As these clothes war the same kind that's worn by some hunter-tramps, I knowed no suspicion would be raised among the enemy by my dress. Well, all at once, I heerd voices, and going to whar they comed from, I hit upon a party o' white hunters, making a fire for a night-lounge. I soon l'arned that they war arter Belton, who, it seems, had been captured the night before, by some o' the Snake scouts. I purtended to be as anxious to git persession of him fur the sake o' the reward offered fur him, as the rest war, so, in the mornin' we all went on together, toward the Snakes, with my bat pulled so far down over my face that the Injuns would not see it enough to recognize me."

He went on to relate what has already been told, after which he marched with the Omahas toward the hostile camp, the exact locality of which he was now enabled to describe to his dusky companions.

By rapid movements the band reached the camp of the enemy an hour later, and, creeping close to it, unobserved, they suddenly rushed to the attack.

Surprised by its suddenness, the Snakes made but a feeble resistance. They fled in confusion. Tamina was killed, and many scalps were taken by their foes.

Among those who escaped was Lorne, much to the regret of Skinflint, who had wanted to capture him.

Lona was found in one of the tents with her hands tied. Her thongs were severed, and she was soon among her people, thanking Skinflint for helping to rescue her.

"And do you s'pose, gal, that I would hev left yer, arter what you did fur me? No, it would not be nat'ral fur me to do that."

"But where is Fireheels?" inquired Lona. "I heard of his being take pris'ner. He not been killed?" she added, her dark eyes gleaming wildly.

"No, he's safe by this time in my cave, I reckon."

And the hunter went on to state how he had saved his young friend.

A few hours later, Lona left the camp of the Omahas.

"I must make sure he safe!" thought the girl, as she hurried on.

Before night, she reached the base of the cliff, in which was the secret cave.

Having made sure there was no spy about the place to hear her, she called Belton by name.

At first he did not appear and her heart sunk within her. Soon, however, she saw him at the opening above.

"Is it you, Lona?" he joyfully cried.

Then he lowered the ladder and the girl was presently at his side.

"Safe now; Fireheels' troubles are over!" said Lona, looking up at him with beaming eyes.

"I have escaped the Injuns, it's true," answered Belton, "but I suppose I am still being hunted for by white people."

"White people cannot hurt," rejoined Lona, with a peculiar expression in her eyes.

"What do you mean? Speak, my good friend; thar's some meaning, I see, that you've not made cl'ar to me?"

"THE WHITE GIRL IS ALIVE!" said Lona.

"How? What white girl? You don't mean—"

"I mean the girl whose name is Bell Danton, and who was thought to be kill!"

The young hunter staggered back, and stared wildly at the speaker.

"Lona, I hope you are not jesting with me. Thar's no use of waking hopes, ef they—"

"Why should Lona jest? It is true what she says," interrupted his companion.

"Where is she? Who, then, was the murdered girl? I saw her, myself. The form was

like that of Miss Danton, and it had on her shawl. The dress, too, was white—the same as hers. I tuck it all in at a glance.”

“It is true. The dead girl have on white dress like that of Bell Danton, and she look, when dead, like Bell Danton. Her shawl belonged to Bell Danton, too. Some must have put it on her. She in woods, at dusk, when she hear scream. She see Lorne strike down girl, and choke her! When Bell see this, it affect her so, she faint. After while she come to, and find herself in outlaws’ cave—in dungeon. Lorne had been take her there! He fasten her in there with chain!”

“So this Lorne is an outlaw and a murderer!” cried Belton, in surprise. “I always thought he war a bad coon, but I’m shore of it now! Whar is Bell Danton—with her father?”

“No, me find her in little cave. Lona going past rock, and she hear voice call out. She pull boulder away from entrance to cave, and there was the white girl.”

“Wasn’t you started, on seein’ one whom you thought war dead?”

“No, for Lona been see before. Lona know she in cave of robbers, for she been see her there. She going that very time to see Mr. Danton, and tell him about it—at time when she pass rock and hear girl.”

“Well, why didn’t you then take her home to her father?”

“She too weak—she sick. Lona take her off to a comfortable place—to a good cave, and there she make her lie down on skins, and give her medicine. She been rave—her brain on fire—but she better now!”

“We will go there, instantly, and take her to her father!” cried Belton.

“Don’t know if she is strong enough yet for walk,” answered Lona. “But we go and see. If not, then Lona go to Logville, tell Mr. Danton, and bring people to help her.”

Belton went with Lona to the cave in which she had left Bell Danton. The retreat was one which the Indian girl had used for her own quarters when the Omahas were encamped near the place. Screened by willows and thick shrubbery, it might have escaped the notice even of a detective.

Entering the cave, Belton saw Miss Danton, still quite weak, seated on a log, which served for a chair in the rocky hollow.

On beholding the young hunter a bright blush suffused her cheeks, and her eyes gleamed with joy.

“Belton!” she cried. “Thank Heaven! you are safe—you are saved! Lorne’s plot to have you hung for a murder has failed!”

“Well, now, you surprise me by what you say, miss, but ef ever thar was a happy man, I’m the one at seeing you alive—for your own sake—and rescued from the dungeon whar Lona says Lorne had put you.”

“Yes, he had his reasons for putting me there,” said Bell. “One was because I was a witness to his crime,” she added with a shudder, “for I saw him strike down and throttle the girl who was found killed; another was because he wanted to have you executed for the crime; and the third was that he wanted to obtain from my father, through some one of his band, a large ransom for my restoration, after you should have perished on the gallows! Yesterday I was freed by one of the gang, a fellow they called John Jasper, and was by him conducted to a cave. He said he felt sorry for me, and was going to restore me to my father, who would come to the cave, if I there waited for him.”

“The distance from there to Logville being five miles, he said I was too weak to walk so far, which, in fact, was really the case.”

“The moment he left the cave he put a boulder, too heavy for me to move, against the entrance. Then I guessed the truth, which was that he wanted to secure the ransom for me from my father. I strove to move away the boulder, but could not. I heard footsteps passing, and called, when Lona, displacing the rock, appeared before me. By this time I was much excited. I told Lona how I came there, but remember little more until I found her yesterday bending over me, and giving me cooling drinks.”

“You should then hev gone to Logville and told about it,” said Belton to the Indian girl.

“Lona then ’fraid to go,” was the answer, “for she been see tracks of Snake Indians, and she fear they make girl pris’ner. Afterward she go out and scout; she see Skinflint, having Lorne captive, ahead of her, and she try to catch up to him, but, before she could, Snakes attack. Then she hide, and after a while, when Skinflint been take pris’ner, she go to rescue him.”

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

SCARCELY had Lona concluded when a shadow darkened the cave, and Lorne sprung through the opening.

“You have escaped me, wretch!” he shouted, pointing a pistol at Belton’s head, “but you shall not live to boast of it!”

He was about to pull the trigger when Lona sprung between the weapon and the youth.

The report of the piece rung sharply, and the Indian girl fell, mortally wounded.

Belton at once raised his rifle and leveled it at the young outlaw’s head.

“Don’t you move from hyar or you are a dead coon!” he cried. “The whole truth has now come out, and it’s been proved that you’re one of the blackest villains on the face of the earth!”

Lorne folded his arms.

“Shoot, if you want to,” he said. “I am not afraid to die. The ‘game’ is up, and I suppose I may as well own it. I have heard most everything that has been said here, for I was hidden in the shrubbery near the opening of the cave, waiting for a favorable moment to get at you!”

“It is not for me to take your life,” answered Belton. “Ef I should, I’d only cheat the scaffold. All I want of you, is to go with me to Logville and give yourself up.”

“I will not go there,” said Lorne. “We will see where I will go to!”

As he spoke he pulled a dirk from his breast-pocket and aimed the point toward his heart.

Ere Belton could have hindered him he would have plunged the weapon into his breast, had not his knife been knocked from his hand by a blow from a rifle upon his wrist, which was benumbed by the stroke.

The next moment the gaunt, shadow-like form of Skinflint, his whitish eyes blazing with a furious expression, glided before of the outlaw.

“Speak!” roared the hunter, shaking him violently. “Speak, and tell me who the gal was you murdered!”

Lorne became as pale as death.

“You will never get that secret out of me!” he gasped.

“Miserable rat! Hyar I am—Skinflint—yer death-shadow—come to make yer own it war my poor little sister Mary yer killed! She war the same complexion as Miss Danton, and, in death, with her face swollen and disfigured, she mout hev looked like her. It war to find out what had become of my sister that I’ve shadowed yer all along. I had a suspicion that you had a hand in her disappearance, but I didn’t think at first that you’d gone so far as to kill her, though I suspected you had killed Miss Danton. Do yer remember what I whispered in yer ear that night in the hollow, jest arter Belton’s ‘scape from prison? It war these words: “You murdered Miss Danton!” but now I know it war my Mary that was killed, and not the other gal!”

To this Lorne made no reply, but he appeared to be much agitated.

Again Skinflint shook him violently.

“Well,” he cried, “yer’ve got cornered at last, and yer’ll die with a rope about yer neck—that’s one consolation. I shall be thar to see yer—to shadow yer to the very scaffold.”

With the assistance of Belton, Skinflint now fastened the hands and feet of the young villain. Meanwhile Lona lay dying.

Miss Danton bent over her, much distressed.

“Good-by,” murmured the Indian girl faintly. “Lona going to better place—to happy hunting ground.”

Belton now stooped down by her side.

She took his hand and pressed it.

“Farewell,” she gasped. “Lona loved the young hunter, Fireheels, and she die happy, because she saved his life with her own, and—”

She never finished the sentence.

The seal of death was on her face, and with one last convulsive movement, she expired.

Skinflint now started for Logville, which he reached in a few hours.

He soon collected a party, among whom, in his carriage, was Mr. Danton, to go with him to the cave.

The joy of the merchant when he beheld his daughter alive can hardly be expressed.

Explanations were made. Then Bell and her father entered the carriage and soon reached Logville. Lorne was also taken to the settlement, some of the men following with the dead body of the Indian girl on a rudely-constructed litter.

Next day the Omahas came and buried Lona, and Belton was present at the funeral ceremony.

Lorne’s trial took place a week later. He made no attempt to deny Miss Danton’s statement. It was also proved, not only by Skinflint’s testimony, but also by that of some of Lorne’s gang lately arrested, that the youth was the chief of the band who had committed so many robberies, and for whom so many hunters had been searching.

The prisoner refused to tell the name of the girl whom he had choked to death in the woods, near Logville. Skinflint, however, felt convinced that it was his sister, Mary, and every time he declared this to the outlaw, the latter’s visage showed an expression of fierce triumph, as if he exulted in the rage and grief of his enemy.

It was generally believed, that she was the person who had been the murderer’s victim, and much sympathy was felt for the rude hunter, whose deep sorrow was plainly depicted on his rugged visage.

Finally Lorne was brought to the gallows. The rope was put about his neck, and the fatal word was about to be given, when a piercing shriek was heard, and the boy, Forner, was seen rushing toward the scaffold, with wild eyes, and a visage as pale as death.

“No! no! don’t hang him! He shall not die! See! I am alive!” cried the lad.

Skinflint looked toward the speaker. His words were unheeded, and, the next moment, Lorne dangled in the air, as the trap gave way beneath his feet. He expired in a few minutes, but Forner did not see his last struggles, for he had fainted.

Ere the boy could drop to the ground, Skinflint caught him in his arms, with a joyful shout.

“Hyar she is, after all!—my own little sister!—the one I thought was killed!”

“That boy?” cried Belton; “you don’t mean—”

“Yes,” interrupted Skinflint “it is my Mary—my sister, dressed in boy’s clothes!”

He pulled a flask from his pocket, and finally succeeded in bringing the disguised girl to her senses.

He supported her to his lodging, and there, for days, he watched by her side, as she lay raving in delirium. At last, however, she recovered, and, on learning what a monstrous villain Lorne had proved himself to be, she gradually ceased to mourn for him.

She stated that she had disguised herself, and came here to watch the man who had treated her so badly, because she had heard that, after deserting her, he had married another person, his cousin, Ellen Boardman, and she wanted to ascertain if the report was true. Tracking Lorne, she saw him meet Ellen in the woods, near Logville, toward dusk. She heard the girl threaten to prosecute him for desertion. This enraging him, he knocked her down and throttled her. It was the remarkable resemblance in personal appearance between the young woman and Bell Danton, previously commented on, together with the fact that each wore a similar white summer dress, and that Ellen had round her Miss Danton’s shawl, which had caused her to be mistaken, in death, for the merchant’s daughter.

Lorne, after killing the girl, had heard Miss Danton’s cry of terror, and seen this witness fall senseless. He had then taken from her, her shawl, and put it round the corpse, after which he had conveyed the unconscious young woman (Miss Danton) to his secret retreat.

Mary, the other witness, had not waited to see him do this, but had fled, horrified from the spot.

Almost driven mad by what she had seen, she had lingered about the outskirts of the settlement. When she learned that Belton was suspected of having murdered the girl who was found in the woods, she had not declared the truth to the authorities, because she would not testify against her husband. Badly as he treated her, she still loved him.”

Skinflint could account for her continued attachment to a man who had treated her so shamefully, and had otherwise proved himself to be so great a villain only by the fact that her mind was ‘unsettled’ by the sufferings she had undergone.

Be this as it might, it is certain that Mary finally regained her cheerfulness, and, again living with her brother, in their old home, made him happy with her pleasant companionship.

It is only necessary to add that the noble young hunter, Frank Belton, was eventually rewarded for the persecutions and trials he had undergone, with the hand, in marriage, of Mr. Danton’s daughter, Bell, who had secretly loved him from the moment he became a visitor at her father’s house.

THE END.

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- 58 The Border King; or, The Secret Foe.
- 71 Delaware Dick, the Young Ranger Spy.
- 74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.
- 88 Holo, the Boy Ranger.
- 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
- 143 Bear-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
- 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
- 153 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
- 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustang.
- 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
- 182 Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
- 202 Prospect Pete; or, The Young Outlaw Hunters.
- 208 The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramps.
- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Ralibolt, the Ranger.
- 384 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
- 417 Webfoot Moose, the Tramp Detective.
- 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 452 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
- 465 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captain.
- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Klown Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Topknot's Crusade.
- 251 Plucky Phil; or, Roan, the Red Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowie.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Cochetopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bully.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Trump Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pards; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Pitiless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 356 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Cutlass; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.
- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Sleuths; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.

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